

Temple of Fear
(KM 036)

Killmaster - XXXVI

Nick Carter

Temple of Fear (1968)
(The 36th book in the Killmaster series)
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Dedicated to The Men of the Secret Services of the United States of
America

Chapter 1

It was the first time that Nick Carter had ever been bored with sex.

He had not thought it possible. Especially not on a mid-afternoon in April, with the sap moving in trees and people and the sound of the cuckoo, at least metaphorically, drowning out the agonizing of Washington's traffic.

Yet this dowdy dame behind the lectern v/as making sex a bore. Nick settled his lank frame a little deeper into the uncomfortable study chair, stared at the tips of his handmade English shoes and tried not to listen. It wasn't easy. Dr. Murial Milholland had a light but penetrating voice. Nick had never, as far as he could recall, made love to a girl named Murial. Spelled with an "a." He sneaked a covert glance at the mimeographed agenda on the armrest of his chair. Yep. Spelled with an "a." Like a cigar? And the lady, the speaker, was just about as sexy as a cigar—

"The Russians, of course, have been operating sex schools in conjunction with their espionage institutions for some time. The Chinese, as far as we know, have not yet emulated them, perhaps because they consider the Russians, as well as ourselves in the West, a decadent people. Be that as it may, however, the Russians do make use of sex, both heterosexual and homosexual, as a most important weapon in their espionage operations. It is just that, a weapon, and it has proven very useful to them. They have invented, and implemented, new techniques that make Mati Hati look like a teenage amateur,

"The two most important actual sources of information obtained by use of sex are, as far as timing goes, information obtained by slips of the tongue during the excitant foreplay, and in the lulled, lethargic and very much off-guard moments immediately following orgasm. Taking Kinsey's primary figures and conjoining them with those of Sikes in his important work, "Ratio of Foreplay to Successful Coition Leading To Dual Orgasm," we find that the average foreplay is slightly under fifteen minutes, the average time to active coitus is about three minutes, and the average time of, or duration of, aftermath of sexual euphoria, is slightly over five minutes. Now let us strike a balance and we find that in the average sexual encounter between persons—in which at least one of the participants is an agent seeking information from the partner—there is a period of some nineteen minutes point five seconds, during which the participant, whom we shall call the 'seek-ee,' is most off guard, and during which the advantage and the opportunity are all on the side of the 'seeker.' "

Nick Carter's eyes had closed long ago. He heard the scratching of chalk on a blackboard, the tapping of a pointer, but he did not look. He did not dare. He did not think he could bear any more disenchantment. He had always thought that sex was fun! Damn Hawk anyway. The old man must be losing his grip at last, as unlikely as that might seem. Nick kept his eyes tightly shut and scowled, shutting out the drone of the "teach" and the rustling, coughing, scratching and throat clearing of his fellow sufferers attending this so-called Seminar on Sex as a Weapon. There were a lot of them—CIA, FBI, CIC, T-men, Army, Navy, and Air people. There was also, and this was a source of deep wonder to the AXEmen, a high-ranking official from the Post Office! Nick knew the man slightly, knew exactly what he did at the PO, and his bafflement increased. Had the enemy come up with a gimmick to use the mails for sexual purposes? Mere prurience? If the latter was the case the PO man was going to be a most disappointed fellow. Nick dozed, sinking deeper into his own thoughts ...

David Hawk, his boss at AXE, had fired the idea at him that morning in the scabby little office in Dupont Circle. Nick, just back from a week's rest on his Indiana farm, had been lolling indolently in the room's one hard chair, dropping ashes on Hawk's linoleum and listening to the clatter of Delia Stokes' typewriter from the outer office. Nick Carter was feeling very fit. He had spent most of the week chopping, sawing and cording wood on the farm, drinking a little and having a mild fling with an old Indiana girl friend. Now he was wearing a light tweed suit, sporting a discreetly daring Sulka tie and feeling his oats. He was ready for action.

Hawk said: "I'm sending you to sex school, boy."

Nick dropped his cigarette and stared at his boss. "You're sending me to what?"

Hawk rolled a dry, unlit cigar around in his thin-lipped mouth and repeated: "I'm sending you to sex school. They call it a seminar on sexual what-you-ma-call-its, something like that, but we'll call it school. Be there at two o'clock this afternoon. I don't know the room number, but it's somewhere in the basement of the old Treasury Building. I'm sure you'll find it okay. If not, ask a guard. Oh, yes—the lecture is being given by a Dr. Murial Milholland. They tell me she is very good."

Nick regarded his fallen cigarette still smoldering on the linoleum. He was too stunned to reach a foot and crush it out. Finally, weakly, all he could summon was—"You've got to be kidding, sir?"

His boss regarded him with a basilisk stare and crunched his false teeth around the cigar. "Kidding? Not in the least, son. I feel, in fact, that I have been remiss in not sending you before. You know as well as I do that the essence of this business is in keeping up with the other

guy. Here at AXE it has to be more than that. We have to stay ahead of the other guy—or we're dead. The Russians have been doing some very interesting things with sex lately."

"I'll just bet," muttered Nick. The old man wasn't kidding. Nick knew Hawk's moods, and this was a serious one. With just a soupcon of malicious needling in it somewhere. Hawk could play it pretty deadpan when he chose.

Nick tried another tack. "I've still got a week of vacation coming."

Hawk looked innocent. "Of course. I know that. So? A couple of hours an afternoon will in no way interfere with your vacation. Be there. And pay attention. You might learn something."

Nick opened his mouth. Before he could speak Hawk said, "That's an order, Nick."

Nick closed his mouth, then said: "Yes, sir!"

Hawk leaned back in his creaky swivel chair. He stared at the ceiling and bit on the cigar. Nick watched him narrowly. The canny old bastard was up to something! But what? Hawk never told you anything until he was ready.

Hawk scratched his scrawny, cross-hatched old farmer's neck, then glanced at his Number One boy. This time there was a hint of benignity in his gravel tones and a glitter in the frosty eyes.

"We all of us," he said sententiously, "have to keep up with the times, my boy. If we don't we are left behind and, in our work here at AXE, that is usually fatal. You know that. I know that Our enemies all know that I love you like a father, Nick, and I don't want anything to happen to you. I want you to stay sharp, keep up with the latest techniques, don't let the cobwebs gather and—"

Nick stood up. He held up a hand. "Please, sir. You wouldn't want me to throw up on this beautiful linoleum. I'll be going now, with your permission?"

Hawk nodded. "With my blessing, son. Just be sure you show up at that seminar this afternoon. That's still an order."

Nick tottered toward the door. "Yes, sir. An order, sir. Go to sex school, sir. Back to kindergarten."

"Nick!"

He halted at the door and glanced back. Hawk's smile had altered subtly, from the benign to the enigmatic. "Yes, old massa?"

"That school, seminar, is an eight-hour deal. Four days. Two hours each afternoon. Same time. This is Monday, right?"

"It was when I came in. Right now I'm not so sure. A lot has happened since I came in this door."

"It's Monday. I want you in here Friday morning, nine sharp, ready to go to work. We've got a very interesting case coming up. It could be a toughie, a real killer,"

Nick Carter glared at his boss. "I'm glad to hear that. After going to sexual day school it should be a pleasure. Good-bye, sir."

"Good-bye, Nicholas," Hawk said sweetly.

As Nick passed through the outer office Delia Stokes glanced up from her desk. "Good-bye, Nick. Have a nice time at school."

He waved a hand at her. "I will—I will! And I'm putting in a voucher for my milk money, too."

As he closed the door behind him he heard her explode in smothered laughter.

David Hawk, in the quiet and dingy little office, doodled on a one-time pad and glanced at the old Western Union clock. It was nearly eleven. The Limeys were due at half past Hawk tossed his chewed cigar into the wastebasket and stripped the cellophane from a new one. He thought of the scene he had just had with Nick. It had been mild fun—he enjoyed needling his best man now and then—and it also ensured that Carter would be around when needed. Nick, especially when he was on vacation, had a way of vanishing into thin air unless he was under specific orders not to do so. Now he was under orders. He would be there Friday morning, ready for business. And the business was grim indeed ...

"Mr. Carter!"

Someone was paging him? Nick stirred. Where in hell was he, anyway?

"Mr. Carter! Please wake up!"

Nick snapped awake, restraining the involuntary urge to reach for his Luger or stiletto. He saw the dirty floor, his own shoes, the pair of slim ankles beneath the midi-skirt. Someone was touching him, shaking his shoulder. He had fallen asleep, damn it!

She was standing very close to him and gave off an effluvium of soap and water and healthy female flesh. She probably wore crisp linen underthings and ironed them herself. And yet those ankles! Even in the bargain basement nylons.

Nick stood up and gave her his very best grin, the one calculated to charm, the one that had charmed thousands of willing females the world over.

"I'm sorry," he said. He meant it. He had been rude and thoughtless and something less than a gentleman. And now, to compound the damage, he had to struggle mightily to repress a yawn. He did manage to restrain it, but he did not fool Dr. Murial Milholland. She stepped back and contemplated him through thick, horn-rimmed glasses.

"Was my lecture really so dull, Mr. Carter?"

He glanced around and his real embarrassment grew. And Nick Carter was a hard man to embarrass. He had made a fool of himself

and, inadvertently, of her. A poor, harmless, spinster who probably had to earn her own living and whose only fault was her ability to make a vital subject dull as ditchwater.

They were alone. The room was deserted. My God! Had he snored in class? Somehow, anyhow, he had to make it up to her. Prove to her that he wasn't all boor.

"I'm sorry," he told her again. "Really and truly sorry, Dr. Milholland. I don't know what the h— what happened. But it wasn't your lecture. I found that most interesting and—"

"As much of it as you heard?" She was regarding him with speculation through the heavy glasses. She tapped a folded paper—a class list on which she must have checked off his name—against teeth that were surprisingly white and even. Her mouth was a trifle wide but well formed, and she was not wearing lipstick.

Nick tried the grin again. He felt like lie horse's ass to end all equine rears. He nodded, "as much as I heard," he admitted sheepishly. "I can't understand it, Dr. Milholland. I really can't I did have a late night and it is spring, and this is my first time back to school for a long while, but none of that is any excuse. It was rude and boorish of me in the extreme, I can only ask you to be forgiving, Doctor." He stopped grinning then and smiled, really feeling like smiling, and said: "I'm not always such a dope, and I wish you'd let me prove it to you."

Sheer inspiration, impulse, that leaped into his mind from nowhere.

Her white forehead knitted in the smallest of frowns. Her skin was clear and milky white, her hair black as tar and worn in a chignon, pulled back tight and bunned at the nape of a slender neck,

"Prove it to me, Mr. Carter? How?"

"By coming out with me for a drink. Right now? And dinner later? And then, well, anything you want to do."

She did not hesitate as long as he thought she might. With the slightest hint of smile she agreed, showing the fine teeth again, but she added: "I don't quite see how having drinks and dinner with you will prove that my lectures aren't dull."

Nick laughed. "That's not the point, Doctor. I'm trying to prove that I'm not really a dope."

For the first time she laughed. A small effort, but a laugh.

Nick Carter took her arm. "Shall we go, Dr. Milholland? I know a little outdoor place near the Mall where the martinis are out of this world."

By the second martini they had built a rapport of sorts and both were feeling more comfortable. Nick had thought the martinis might do it. They most always did. The odd fact was, he was becoming most

sincerely interested in this dowdy Dr. Murial Milholland. She had taken off her glasses once, to clean them, and her eyes were a wide-set gray specked with green and amber. Her nose was ordinary, laced with little freckles, but her cheekbones were high enough to flatten her facial planes and give her face a triangular cast. It was a plain face, he thought, but certainly an interesting one. Nick Carter was an expert, a connoisseur of beautiful women, and this one, with a little grooming and some fashion advice could be—

“No, Nick. No. Not at all what you’re thinking.”

He gazed at her in puzzlement “What was I thinking, Murial?” After the first martini had come the first names.

The gray eyes, swimming behind the thick lenses, studied him over the rim of the martini glass.

“That I’m really not as dowdy as I seem. As I look. But I am. I assure you that I am. Every bit as. I’m a real Plain Jane, Nick, so just make up your mind to it”

He shook his head. “I still don’t believe it I’ll bet it’s all a disguise. You probably do it to keep men from making passes at you.”

She fussed with the olive in her martini. He wondered if she was used to drinking, if the alcohol might not be getting to her. Yet she appeared sober enough.

“You know,” she said, “that’s pretty corny, Nick. Like the movies and the plays and the TV shows where the frumpy spinster always takes off her glasses and turns into the golden girl. Metamorphosis. The caterpillar into the gilded butterfly. No, Nick. I’m sorry. More sorry than you know. I think I’d like it that way. But it isn’t. I’m just a dowdy Ph.D. who specializes in sexology. I work for the government and I give dull lectures. Important lectures, maybe, but dull. Right, Nick?”

He knew then that the gin was beginning to get to her. He wasn’t sure he liked that, because he was genuinely enjoying himself. With Nick Carter, top killer for AXE, lovely ladies were a dime a dozen. There had been one yesterday; there would probably be another one tomorrow. This girl, woman, this Murial, was different. A small tremor, a little shock of recognition, moved in his brain. Was he beginning to get old?

“Don’t I Nick?”

“Don’t you what, Murial?” He had been wandering.

“Give dull lectures.”

Nick Carter lit one of his gold-tipped cigarettes— Murial did not smoke—and glanced about him. The little sidewalk cafe was thronged. The late April afternoon, as softly impressionistic as a Monet, was fading into gauzy twilight. The cherry trees along the Mall were glowing panaches of color.

Nick indicated the cherry trees with his cigarette. "You've got me, honey. Cherry trees and Washington—how can I tell a lie? Hell yes, your lectures are dull! But you aren't. Not in the least. And remember—I cannot, in these circumstances, tell a lie."

Murial took off her thick glasses and put them on the tiny table. She put her small hand on his big one and smiled. "That may not seem much of a compliment to you," she said, "but to me it's a hell of a big one. A hell of a big one. Hell? Did I say that?"

"You did."

Murial giggled. "I haven't sworn in years. Or enjoyed myself in years like I have this afternoon. You're a nice man, Mr. Nick Carter. A very nice man."

"And you're a little loaded," said Nick. "You'd better lay off the sauce if we're going to do the town tonight. I don't want to have to carry you in and out of nightclubs."

Murial was polishing her glasses with a serviette. "I really need these damned things, you know. I can hardly see a yard without them." She put the glasses on. "Can I have another drink, Nick?"

He stood up and put money on the table. "No. Not right now. Let's get you home and changed into that one evening gown you were bragging about"

"I wasn't bragging. I have got one. Just one. And I haven't worn it in nine months. Haven't needed it. Until tonight"

She lived in an apartment just over the Maryland line. In the taxi she put her head on his shoulder and was not very talkative. She seemed to be deep in thought Nick did not try to kiss her and she did not seem to expect it.

Her apartment was small, but lavishly furnished in good taste and in an expensive neighborhood. He judged that she did not lack for money.

After a moment she left him in the living room and disappeared. He had just lit a cigarette, frowning and having second thoughts—hating himself for them—but there were three more sessions of this goddamned silly seminar and he was under orders to attend and it just could be strained and awkward. What in hell had he gotten himself into?

He looked up. She was standing in the door, naked. And he had been right. Under the frumpy clothes there had been, all along, this glorious, white, slim-flanked, gently curving, high-breasted body.

She smiled at him. He noticed that she had put on lipstick. And not only on her mouth; she had rouged her small nipples as well.

"I have decided," she said. "To hell with the evening gown! I'm not going to need it tonight, either. I never did like nightclubs."

Nick, without taking his eyes off her, stubbed out his cigarette and

took off his jacket.

She came toward him, undulant, not so much walking as gliding over the deep pile. She stopped about six feet from him.

“Do you like me this way, Nick?”

He could not understand why his throat was so dry. It wasn't as though he were some teenager having his first woman. He was Nick Carter! Top man for AXE. Professional agent, licensed killer of his country's enemies, veteran of a thousand boudoir bouts.

She put her hands on slim hips and pirouetted gracefully before him. Light from a single lamp shimmered along her inner thighs. The flesh was translucent marble.

“Do you really like me this way, Nick?”

“I love you that way.” He began to pull off his clothes.

“You're sure? Some men don't like naked women. I can put on stockings if you like. Black stockings? A garter belt? A bra?”

He kicked a last shoe across the living room. He had never been more ready in his life and he needed nothing but to meld his flesh with the flesh of this dowdy little teacher of sex who had suddenly turned into the golden girl after all.

He reached for her. She came into his arms eagerly, her mouth seeking his, her tongue slashing at his own. Her body was both cool and burning and it trembled all along the length of his.

After a moment she pulled away enough to whisper, “I'll bet, Mr. Carter, that you don't go to sleep during this lecture!”

He made to pick her up, to carry her into the bedroom.

“No,” said Dr. Murial Milholland. “Not the bedroom. Right here on the floor.”

Chapter 2

Delia Stokes ushered the two Englishmen into Hawk's office at precisely eleven-thirty. Hawk had expected Cecil Aubrey to be on time. They were old acquaintances and he had never known the big Britisher to be late for anything. Aubrey was a big-shouldered man in his early sixties and only now beginning to show traces of a small potbelly. He would still be a tough man in a fight.

Cecil Aubrey was top man in Britain's M16, that famous counterespionage organization for which Hawk had a great deal of professional respect. The fact that he had come in person to AXE's dingy quarters, come begging as it were, would have convinced Hawk—had he not already suspected—that the matter was of prime importance. At least to the British. So Hawk was prepared to do a little shrewd horse trading.

If Aubrey felt any surprise at the cramped meagerness of Hawk's quarters he concealed it well. Hawk knew that he did not dwell in the splendor of Whitehall or Langley, and he did not care. His budget was tight and he preferred to put every working dollar into actual operations and let the facade decay if it must. The fact was that AXE was in more than financial trouble at the moment. There had been a spate of bad luck, as sometimes happened, and Hawk had lost three top agents in a month. Dead. A cut throat in Istanbul; knife in the back in Paris; one found in Hong Kong harbor, so bloated and fish eaten that death cause was hard to establish. At the moment Hawk had only two Killmasters left. Number Five, a fledgling he did not want to risk on a rough mission, and Nick Carter. Top man. On this upcoming mission he was going to have to use Nick. It was one of the reasons he had sent him to that nutty school, to keep him nearby.

The amenities were brief, Cecil Aubrey introduced his companion as a Henry Terence. Terence, it appeared, was M15 working in close liaison with Aubrey and M16. He was a lank man with a dour Scot's face and a tic in his left eye. He smoked an odoriferous cutty pipe that made Hawk actually light a cigar in self-defense.

Hawk twitted Aubrey about his upcoming knighthood, One of the things that would have surprised Nick Carter about his boss was that the old man read the honors list.

Aubrey laughed a little uncomfortably and brushed it aside. "Ruddy nuisance, you know. Rather puts one in a class with the Beatles. But one can hardly refuse. Anyway, David, I didn't fly the Atlantic to talk about any bloody knighthood."

Hawk puffed a blue stream at the ceiling. He really didn't like to

smoke cigars.

"I didn't think you did, Cecil. You want something from me. From AXE. You always do. That means you're in trouble. Tell me about it and we'll see what can be done."

Delia Stokes brought in another chair for Terence. He sat in a corner, perched like a crow on a crag, and said nothing.

"It's Richard Philston," said Cecil Aubrey. "We've had a strong clue that he's coming out of Russia at last. We want him, David. How we want him! And this may be our only chance."

Even Hawk was shaken. He had known that when Aubrey came hat in hand it was something big—but this big! Richard Philston! His second thought was that the English would be prepared to give away quite a lot for help in getting Philston. Yet he kept his face serene. Not a wrinkle betrayed his excitement.

"It must be a bad steer," he said. "Maybe a false plant for some reason. Philston would never come out of Russia. The man is no idiot, Cecil. We both know that. We should. He fooled us all for thirty years."

From the corner Terence growled some Scot's malediction deep in his throat. Hawk could sympathize. Richard Philston had made the Yanks look pretty silly—for a time he had actually served as chief of British intelligence in Washington, pulling the wool successfully over the eyes of the FBI and CIA—but he had made his own people, the English, look like absolute morons. Once he had even been suspected, tried, cleared, and had immediately gone back to spying for the Russians.

Yes. Hawk could understand how badly the British wanted Richard Philston.

Aubrey shook his head. "No, David. I don't think it's a bad steer or a plant. Because we've got something else to go with it—there is some sort of deal being arranged between the Kremlin and Peking. Something very, very big! This we are sure of. At the moment we have a very good man in the Kremlin, tops in every respect, as good as Penkovskiy ever was. He's never been wrong and now he tells us that the Kremlin and Peking are cooking up a stew that might damned well blow the lid off. But to do it they, the Russians, will have to use their best man. Who else but Philston?"

David Hawk stripped cellophane from a new cigar. He watched Aubrey narrowly, his own withered face as impassive as a scarecrow.

He said: "But your big man in the Kremlin doesn't know what the Chinese and the Russians are planning? Is that it?"

Aubrey looked slightly miserable. "Yes. That's it. But we know where. Japan."

Hawk smiled. "You people have a good network in Japan. I happen

to know that. Why can't they handle it?"

Cecil Aubrey left his chair and began to pace the narrow room. At the moment he reminded Hawk, absurdly, of the character actor who had played Watson to Basil Rathbone's Holmes. Hawk could never remember the man's name. Yet he did not underestimate Cecil Aubrey. Never. The man was good. Maybe even as good as Hawk himself.

Aubrey stopped pacing and towered over Hawk's desk. "For the excellent reason," he exploded, "that Philston is Philston! He ran my department for years, man! He knows every code, or did. It doesn't matter. This isn't a matter of codes or rigamarole like that. But he knows our ploys, our methods of organization, our MO—damn it, he knows everything about us. He even knows a lot of our men, at least the old-timers. And I daresay he keeps a file updated—the Kremlin must be making him earn his keep—and so he'll know a lot of our new men, too. No, David. We can't do it. It needs an outsider, another service. Will you help us?"

Hawk studied his old friend for a long time. Finally he said, "You know about AXE, Cecil. Officially you're not supposed to, but you do. And you come to me. To AXE, You want Philston killed?"

Terence broke his Scot's taciturnity long enough to growl. "Yes, mon. That's exactly what we do want."

Aubrey paid no attention to his subordinate. He sat down again and lit a cigarette with fingers that, Hawk noted with some small surprise, were trembling slightly. He was puzzled. It took a lot to unnerve Aubrey. It was then that Hawk first distinctly heard the clicking of wheels within wheels—for which he had been listening.

Aubrey pointed the cigarette like a smoky wand. Tor our ears, David. In this room and for our six ears only—yes, I want Richard Philston killed."

Something moved in the back of Hawk's brain. Something that clung to shadow and would not be hauled into light. A long ago whisper? Rumor? Press story? Men's room joke? What in hell? He could not summon it. So he pushed it back to be fallow in his subconscious. It would emerge when it was ready.

Meantime he put into words what was so obvious. Tom want him dead, Cecil. But your government, the Powers, they don't? They want him alive. They want him caught and taken back to England to stand trial and be hanged in the proper manner. Isn't that it, Cecil?"

Aubrey met Hawk's glance squarely. "Yes, David. That's it. The PM—it's gone that high—agrees that Philston should be taken if possible and brought to England to stand trial. This was decided on quite some time ago. I was put in charge. Until now, with Philston safe in Russia, there has been nothing to be in charge of. But now, by God, he's

coming out, or we think he is, and I want him. God, David, how I want him!"

"Dead?"

"Yes. Dead. The PM, Parliament, even some of my superiors, aren't professionals the way we are, David. They think it's a simple thing to catch a man as slippery as Philston and get him back to England. I don't. There will be too many complications, too many chances for slip-ups, too many opportunities for him to escape again. He isn't alone, you know. The Russians won't just stand by and let us arrest him and take him back to England. They'll kill him first! He knows too much about them, he'll try to make a deal, and they know that. No, David. It's got to be a straight kill job and you're the only one I can turn to."

Hawk said it more to clear the air, to have it said, than because he cared. He ran AXE. And why wouldn't that elusive thought, that shadow skulking in his brain, come into the light? Had it been so scandalous that it had to bury itself?

He said, "If I agree to this, Cecil, it certainly must remain between the three of us. One hint that I'm using AXE to do someone else's dirty work and Congress will be yelling for my head on a platter. They would get it, too, if they could prove it."

"You'll do it, David?"

Hawk stared at his old friend. "I really don't know yet. What is going to be in it for me? For AXE? Our fees for this sort of thing come high, Cecil. There will be a very high quid pro quo—a very big tit for tat. You realize that?"

Aubrey looked miserable again. Miserable but resolute. "I realize that. I expected it, David. I'm not an amateur, man. I expect to pay."

Hawk took a fresh cigar from the box on his desk. He did not look at Aubrey for the moment. He found himself hoping most devoutly, that the debugging crew—they made a thorough sweep of AXE headquarters every two days—had done their job well. Because if Aubrey would meet his terms, Hawk had decided to take on the job. To do Miffs dirty work for them. It would be a kill mission and probably not as difficult to execute as Aubrey imagined. Not for Nick Carter. But Aubrey would have to pay his price.

"Cecil," Hawk said mildly, "I think that maybe we can do a deal. But I'll want the name of that man you've got in the Kremlin. I promise that I won't try to contact him, but I'll have to know his name. And I want an equal, full share of everything he sends out. In other words, Cecil, your man in the Kremlin will also be my man in the Kremlin! Do you agree to that?"

In his corner Terence made a strangled sound. He seemed to have swallowed his cutty pipe.

It was quiet in the little office. The Western Union clock ticked with a tiger sound. Hawk waited. He knew what Cecil Aubrey was going through.

A top agent, an unsuspected man in Kremlin high circles, was worth more than all the gold and jewels in the world. All the platinum. All the uranium. To make such a contact, to keep it fruitful and unsuspected, took years of arduous work and all the luck there was. It was, on the face of it, impossible. Yet it had been done once. Penkovskiy. Until at last he had slipped and they shot him. Now Aubrey was saying—and Hawk believed him—the M16 had another Penkovskiy in the Kremlin. Hawk happened to know that the United States did not. The CIA had been trying for years and had never made it. Hawk waited patiently. It was quite a plum. He could not quite believe that Aubrey would go along.

Aubrey nearly choked but he got the words out “All right, David. It’s a deal. You drive a hard bargain, man.”

Terence was regarding Hawk with something very akin to awe, and most certainly respect. Terence was a Scot who knew another Scot, at least by inclination if not blood, when he saw him.

“You understand,” said Aubrey, “that I’ll have to have some absolute proof that Richard Philston is dead.”

Hawk’s smile was dry. “I think that can be arranged, Cecil. Though I can hardly have him killed in Times Square, even if we could get him there. How about sending his ears, neatly done up, to your office in London?”

“Seriously, David.”

Hawk nodded. “Photographs do?”

“If they’re good. I would prefer, if possible, a finger for prints. It will be absolute that way.”

Hawk nodded again. It would not be the first time Nick Carter had brought home a souvenir.

Cecil Aubrey motioned to the quiet man in the corner. “All right, Terence. You can take over now. Explain just what we’ve got so far and why we think Philston is coming out.”

To Hawk he said, “Terence is M15, as I said, and he is handling the superficial aspects of this Peking-Kremlin thing. I say superficial because we think it is a front, a cover, for something bigger. Terence —”

The Scot took the foul pipe from between large brown teeth. “It’s as Mr. Aubrey says, sir. The wee bit of information we’ve got so far, but this we’re sure of, is that the Russians are sending Philston to help the Chicoms organize a giant sabotage campaign all through Japan. Especially in Tokyo. There they plan to stage a massive blackout, the same as you had yersels not too long back in New York. The Chicoms

plan to play almighty hob, you see, and either stop or burn everything in Japan. Most of it, anyway. One story we've had is that Peking insists on Philston running the job or no deal. That's why he has to come out of Russia and—"

Cecil Aubrey broke in. "There's also another story— that Moscow insists that Philston be in charge of the sabotage, so it won't be botched. They don't much trust the Chinese for efficiency. That is still another reason why Philston would have to risk his neck and come out."

Hawk looked from one man to the other. "Something tells me that you don't buy either story."

"No," Aubrey said. "We don't. At least I don't. The job just isn't big enough for Philston! Sabotage, yes. Burning down Tokyo, all that, will have a hell of an impact and be a coup for the Chicoms. I agree. But it really isn't Philston's line of work. And not only isn't it big enough, important enough, to entice him out of Russia—I know something about Richard Philston that very few people know. I knew him, remember, worked with him in M16 when he was riding high. I was just a sub then, but I haven't forgotten a thing about that bloody damned bastard. He was an assassination man! An expert."

"I'll be damned," Hawk said. "Live and learn. I didn't know that. I always thought of Philston as a sort of tea-and-crumpets sort of spy. Efficient as hell, deadly, but the striped-pants kind."

"Not at all," said Aubrey grimly. "He planned a lot of murders. Planned them well, too. That's why I'm certain that if he is coming out of Russia at last it is for something more important than sabotage. Even big-time sabotage. I've got the feeling, David, and you should know what that means. You've been in this business longer than I have."

Cecil Aubrey went to his chair and sank into it. "Carry on, Terence. Your ball. I'll keep my big mouth shut for a time."

Terence had reloaded his pipe. To Hawk's relief he did not light it. Terence said: "The fact is that the Chicoms haven't been doing all their own dirty work, sir. Not very much of it, in fact. They do the planning, but they force the Eta to do the really dirty and bloody jobs. They use terror, of course."

Hawk must have looked puzzled, for Terence halted a moment, frowned, then went on. "You know about the Eta, sir? Some call them the Burakumin. They're the very lowest cast in Japan, the untouchables. Pariahs. There are more than two million of them and very few people, even Japanese, know that they even exist. The Jap government keeps them in ghettos and out of the sight of tourists. The fact is that the government, up to now, has tried to ignore the problem. The official policy is fure-nai— don't touch. Even though a

majority of the Eta are on public relief. It's quite a problem, and naturally the Chicoms are exploiting it to the utmost. A discontented minority like the Eta—they would be fools not to."

It all had a familiar ring to Hawk. Ghettos had been very much in the news of late. And the Commies, of one stripe or another, had been doing a little exploiting of minorities in the States.

"It's a beautiful setup for the Chicoms," he admitted. "The sabotage, especially, carried out under the guise of riots. It's a classic technique—the Commies plan it and let this Eta group carry it out. The Etas get all the blame. But aren't the Eta Japanese? Like all the rest of the country? I mean if there is no color problem, such as we have here and—"

Cecil Aubrey could not keep his big mouth shut after all. He interrupted.

"They are Japanese. One hundred percent. It's really a matter of traditional caste prejudice, David, and we haven't time for anthropological tangents. But the fact that the Eta are Japanese, and look and talk just like anyone else, helps the Chicoms enormously. The Eta can go anywhere and do anything. No problem there. A lot of them 'pass,' as you say here in the States. The fact is that a very few Chicoms, well organized, can control a huge number of Eta and use them for their own purposes. Sabotage and murder, mostly. Now, with this big—"

Hawk broke in. "You say the Chicoms control the Eta by terror?"

"Yes. They use, among other things, a machine. A sort of device, an improved version of the old Death of a Thousand Cuts. It's called the Bloody Buddha. Any Eta man who disobeys them or betrays them is put into the machine and—"

But for once Hawk was not paying too close attention. It had just come to him Out of the mists of years. Richard Philston was, had been, one hell of a ladies' man. Hawk remembered it now. It had been well hushed up at the time. Philston had taken Cecil Aubrey's young wife away from him and then deserted her. A few weeks later she committed suicide.

His old friend, Cecil Aubrey, was using Hawk, and AXE, to settle a private vendetta!

Chapter 3

It was a few minutes after eight in the morning. Nick Carter had left Murial Milholland's apartment an hour before, ignoring the curious glances of a milkman and newsboy, and cabbed back to his own suite in the Mayflower Hotel. He was, for him, a little beat. He and Murial had switched to brandy and, between lovemaking—they had eventually adjourned to the bedroom—he had put away a lot of the grape. Nick never got drunk and he had the capacity of a Falstaff; he never had hangovers. Yet, on this particular morning, he was feeling just a tiny bit fuzzy.

Thinking back, later, he was also to blame it on the fact that he was more than a little bemused by Dr. Murial Milholland. Plain Jane, with the sumptuous body, who had been such a demon in bed. He had left her snoring very softly, still attractive in the morning light, and as he left the apartment he knew he was coming back. Nick couldn't understand it. She just wasn't his type! And yet—and yet—

He was shaving slowly, pensively, wondering with half his mind what it would be like to be married to an intelligent, mature woman who also happened to be an expert in sex, off the lectern as well as on it, when the door buzzer rasped. Nick was wearing only a dressing gown.

He did glance at the big bed as he went through the bedroom to answer the door. He did think of the Luger, Wilhelmina, and of Hugo, the stiletto, concealed in a zipper opening in the mattress. They were resting for the moment. Nick did not like to walk around Washington loaded for bear. Nor did Hawk approve of it. At times Nick did carry a little Beretta Cougar, a .380 that packed wallop enough at close range. For the past two days, because the shoulder clip was being repaired, he had not carried even that.

The door buzzer went again. Insistent. Nick hesitated, glanced at the bed where the Luger was snuggled away, then thought to hell with it. At eight in the morning on an ordinary Tuesday? Anyway he could take care of himself, there was a safety chain and he knew how to approach a door. It was probably only Hawk sending a mass of briefing material by special messenger. The old man did that occasionally.

Buzzzzzz—buzzzzzzz—buzzzzz

Nick approached the door from the side, close to the wall. Anyone firing through the door would miss him.

Buzzzzzz—buzzzzzzz—buzzzzzzz—buz

"All right," he called in sudden irritation. "All right! Leave the

buzzer on the wall. Who is it?"

Silence.

Then: "Is Kyoto Girl Scouts. You buy cookies, prease?"

"Who?" His hearing had always been acute. Yet he could have sworn—

"Is Girl Scouts from Japan, prease. Here for Cherry Festival. Sell cookies. You buy, prease?"

Nick Carter shook his head to clear it. Okay. He had had that much brandy! But this he had to see for himself. The chain was latched. He opened the door a crack, keeping to one side, and peered cautiously out into the corridor. "Girl Scouts?"

"Yis. Have very good cookies for sale. You buy, prease?"

She bowed. The other three bowed. Nick damned near bowed. Because damned if they weren't Girl Scouts. Japanese Girl Scouts.

Four of them. As pretty as though they had stepped right out of a silk print. Demure. Shapely little Japanese dolls in Girl Scout uniforms, with pert tams worn jauntily on sleek dark heads, miniskirts and knee socks. Four pairs of luminous slant eyes watched him in anticipation. Four sets of perfect teeth flashed the old Oriental con at him. Buy our cookies. They were as cute as a litter of speckled pups.

Nick Carter began to laugh. He couldn't help it. Wait until he told Hawk about this—or should he tell the old man? Nick Carter, top man in AXE, Killmaster himself, being very much alert and tippy-toeing to the door to confront—a bunch of Girl Scouts selling cookies. Nick made a gallant effort to stop laughing, to keep a straight face, but it was too much. He broke up again.

The girl who had spoken—she was closest to the door and was carrying a stack of cooky boxes which she gripped with her chin, stared at the AXEman in puzzlement. The other three girls, all carrying boxes of cookies, also stared in polite wonderment.

The girl said: "We do not understand, sar. We are make something funny? If so we are solly. Not come to make joke—come to sell cookies for our fare back to Japan. You buy, prease. Help very much. We love your United States very much, have been here I for Cherry Festival, but now with much sorrow must return to our own country. You buy cookies, prease?"

He was being rude again. As he had been with Murial Milholland. Nick wiped his eyes on the back of his dressing gown sleeve and slipped the chain. "I'm sorry, girls. Very sorry. It isn't you. It's me. This is one of my nutty mornings."

He sought for the Japanese word, tapping his temple with his finger. "Kichigai. That's me. Kichigai!"

The girls looked at each other, then back at him. None of them spoke. Nick pushed the door open. "It's all right, I promise. I'm

harmless. Come in. Bring the cookies. I'll buy all of them. How much are they?" He would give Hawk a dozen boxes. Let the old man ponder that!

"One dolla box."

"That's cheap enough." He stood back as they trooped in, bringing the fragile odor of cherry blossoms with them. They were, he thought, all about fourteen or fifteen. Pretty. Nubile. All well developed for teenagers, with their little breasts and buttocks bouncing and jouncing under the immaculate green uniform. The skirts, he thought as he watched them stack the cookies on a coffee table, appeared to be just a little mini for Girl Scouts. But maybe in Japan—

They were cute. So was the little Nambu pistol that suddenly appeared in the hand of the girl who had spoken. She pointed it directly at Nick Carter's flat, hard stomach.

"Put up your hands, please. Stand perfectly still. I do not wish to harm you. Kato—the door!"

One of the girls glided around Nick, keeping well away from him. The door closed softly, the lock clicked, the safety was slithered into the groove.

Well and truly conned, Nick thought. Taken. His professional admiration was genuine. It had been a masterful piece of workmanship.

"Mato—close all the drapes. Sato—you search the rest of the apartment. The bedroom especially. He may have a lady here."

"Not this morning," said Nick. "But thanks for the compliment, anyway."

The Nambu winked at him. It was a wicked little eye. "Sit down," the leader said coldly. "Sit down, please, and remain silent until you are told to speak. And do not try any tricks, Mr. Nick Carter. I know all about you. A great deal about you."

Nick went to the indicated chair. "Even to my ravenous appetite for Girl Scout cookies—at eight o'clock in the morning?"

"I said quiet! You will be permitted to talk all you like—after you have heard what I have to say."

Nick sat down. Under his breath he muttered, "Banzai!" He crossed his long legs, realized that the dressing gown was gaping and hastily closed it. The girl with the pistol noted it and smiled faintly. "No false modesty is necessary with us, Mr. Carter. We are not really Girl Scouts."

"If I were permitted to talk—I'd say that was beginning to dawn on me."

"Quiet!"

He shut up. He nodded wistfully toward a box of cigarettes and a lighter on a nearby taboret.

“No!”

He watched in silence. They were a most efficient little group. The door was checked again, the drapes, the room flooded with light Kato came back to report that there was no back door. And that, Nick thought with some bitterness, had been to provide additional security. Well—nobody could win ‘em all. But, if he got out of this one alive, his biggest problem was going to be keeping it quiet. Nick Carter taken in his own apartment by a bunch of Girl Scouts!

Things were quiet now. The girl with the Nambu sat opposite Nick on a sofa with the other three seated primly nearby. They were all staring at him gravely. Four little maids from school. This was a real weird Mikado.

Nick said: “Tea, anyone?”

She didn’t tell him to keep quiet and she didn’t shoot him. She crossed her legs, showing a fringe of pink panty under the miniskirt. Her legs, all their legs—now that he really noticed—were a bit more developed and shapely than those usually found on Girl Scouts. He suspected they were wearing pretty tight bras, too.

“I am Tonaka,” said the girl with the Nambu pistol.

He nodded gravely. “Pleased.”

“And these,” she indicated the others, “are—”

“I know. Mato, Sato and Kato. The cherry blossom sisters. Glad to know you, girls.”

All three of them smiled. Kato giggled.

Tonaka frowned. “It pleases you to be facetious, Mr. Carter. I wish you would not. This is a very serious matter.”

Nick knew that. He could tell by the way she held the little pistol. Most professional. But he needed time. Badinage got you time—sometimes. He was trying to figure the angles. Who were they? What did they want with him? He hadn’t been in Japan for over a year and as far as he knew he was clean. What then? He kept drawing blanks.

“I know,” he told her. “I know it’s serious. Believe me I do. It’s just that I have this gallant manner in the face of certain death, and—”

The girl called Tonaka spat like a wildcat. Her eyes narrowed and she was not at all pretty. She pointed the Nambu at him like an accusing finger.

“You will be quiet again, please! I have not come all this way to make stupid jokes.”

Nick sighed. Flunked again. He wondered what had ever happened to “prease?”

Tonaka fumbled in a pocket of her Girl Scout blouse. It concealed what the AXEmen could see, now he could see, was a very well-developed left breast.

She spun a coin-like object at him. “Do you recognize that, Mr.

Carter?"

He did. Instantly. He should. He had had it made in London. Had it made by an expert workman in an East End curio shop. He had given it to a man who had saved his life in an alley fight in that same East End. Carter had been very near to cashing in that night in Limehouse.

He hefted the heavy medallion in his hand. It was of gold, the size of an old-fashioned silver dollar, and inset with jade. The jade was worked into letters, forming a scroll beneath a tiny green hatchet. AXE.

The letters were: Esto Perpetua. Let it endure forever. The it had been his friendship for Kunizo Matu, his old friend and long time judo-karate teacher. Nick frowned at the medallion. That had been a long time ago. Kunizo had returned to Japan long ago. He would be an old man now.

Tonaka was watching him narrowly. The Nambu was doing the same.

Nick tossed the medallion and caught it. "Where did you get this?"

"My father gave it to me."

"Kunizo Matu is your father?"

"He is, Mr. Carter. He has spoken of you often. Since I am a child I have heard the name of the great Nick Carter. Now I come to you to ask for help. Or rather my father sends for help. He has great faith and trust in you. He is sure that you will come to help us."

Suddenly he needed a cigarette. Badly needed it The girl permitted him to light up. The other three, solemn as owls now, stared at him with unblinking dark eyes.

Nick said: "I owe your father a debt. And we were friends. Of course I will help. I will do anything I can. But how? When? Is your father in the States?"

"He is in Japan. In Tokyo. He is old and sick now and cannot travel. That is why you must come with us at once."

He closed his eyes and squinted against the smoke, trying to get the thing straight in his mind. Ghosts from the past could be disconcerting. But a debt was a debt He owed his life to Kunizo Matu. He would have to do everything he could. But first—

"All right, Tonaka. But first things first. One thing at a time. The first thing you can do is put away that gun. If you're Kunizo's daughter you don't need it—"

She kept the gun on him. "I think maybe I do, Mr. Carter. We will see. I will put it away when I have your promise to come to Japan to help my father. And Japan."

"But I've already told you! I will help. That's a solemn promise. Now let's stop playing cops and robbers. Put that gun away and tell me all about the trouble your father's in. I'll figure out what to do and

do it as soon as I possibly can. I—”

The gun remained on his belly. Tonaka was looking not pretty again. And most impatient.

“You still do not understand, Mr. Carter. You are coming to Japan now. This minute—or at least very soon. My father’s trouble will not wait. There is no time for channels or for officials to confer for the various services to consult on steps to be taken. You see that I understand something of these matters. So does my father. He has long been in the Secret Service of my country and he knows that red tape is the same everywhere. That is why he gave me the medallion and told me to find you. To ask you to come at once. This I intend to do.”

The little Nambu winked at Nick again. He was beginning to tire of the flirtation. The unholy thing about it was—she meant it. She meant every damned word of it! Now!

Nick had a thought. He and Hawk had a voice code which they sometimes used. Maybe he could warn the old man. Then they could get these Japanese cowgirls under control, get them to talk and make sense, and start the ball rolling to help his friend. Nick sighed deeply. He would just have to admit to Hawk that he had been captured by a band of nutty Girl Scouts and ask his compatriots in AXE to get him out of it. Maybe they couldn’t do it. It might take the CIA. Or the FBI. Maybe the Army and Navy and Marines. He just didn’t know—

He said: “All right, Tonaka. Have it your way. At once. As soon as I can get dressed and pack a suitcase. And make a phone call.”

“No phone calls.”

For the first time he considered taking the gun away from her. This was getting ridiculous. Killmaster should be able to take a gun away from a Girl Scout! That was the trouble—she wasn’t a Girl Scout. None of them were. Because now each of the others, Kato, Sato and Mato, had reached under those trim skirts and come up with Nambu pistols. All pointed insistently at Carter.

“What’s the name of your troop, girls? Death’s Angels?”

Tonaka wiggled the pistol at him. “My father told me that you would have many tricks, Mr. Carter. He is sure that you will honor your promise, your friendship to him, but he warned me that you would insist on doing it in your own way. This cannot be done. It must be done our way—in absolute secrecy.”

“But it can be,” said Nick. “I have a great organization at my command. Many such, if I need them. I did not know that Kunizo was in your Secret Service —my felicitations to him for a well-kept secret—but then he surely must know the value of organization and cooperation. They can do the work of a thousand men—and security is no problem and—”

The pistol halted him. "You are very eloquent, Mr. Carter. And very wrong. My father understands all those things, naturally, and they are exactly what he does not want. Or need. As for channels—you know as well as I that you are always watched, even if routinely, and so is your organization. You cannot make a single move without someone observing and passing it on. No, Mr. Carter. No phone calls. No official help. This is a job for one man, a friend who can be trusted and who will do as my father asks without asking too many questions. You are the perfect man for the thing that must be done—and you owe a life to my father. May I have the medallion back, please."

He tossed her the medallion. "All right," he conceded. "You seem determined and you have the gun. All of you have the guns. So it looks like I go to Japan with you. Right now. I drop everything, just like that, and take off. You realize, of course, that if I just disappear there will be a worldwide alert in a matter of hours?"

Tonaka allowed herself a tiny smile. He noticed that she was almost beautiful when she smiled. "We will worry about that later, Mr. Carter."

"What about passports? Customs?"

"No problem, Mr. Carter. Our passports are in perfect order. I'm sure that you have many passports—my father assured me that you would have. Most certainly you have a diplomatic passport that will suffice for this. Any other objections?"

"Passage? There are such things as tickets and reservations."

"All taken care of, Mr. Carter. Everything is arranged. We will be in Tokyo in a very few hours."

He was beginning to believe it. Really believe it. They probably had a space ship waiting out on the Mall. Oh, brother! Hawk was going to love this. A big mission upcoming—Nick knew the signs—and Hawk keeping him on tap until the thing was ripe and now this. There was also the minor matter of the lady, Murial Milholland. He had a date with her tonight. The least a gentleman could do was call and—

Nick looked pleadingly at Tonaka. "Just one phone call? To a lady? I don't want to stand her up."

The little Nambu was adamant. "No."

NICK CARTER VANISHES — POTOMAC DRAGGED—

Tonaka stood up. Kato, Mato and Sato stood up. All the little guns blinked at Nick Carter.

"We will now," said Tonaka, "go into the bedroom, Mr. Carter."

Nick blinked at them. "Huh?"

"In the bedroom, please. At once!"

Nick stood up and tightened the dressing gown around him. "If you say so."

“Hands up, please.”

He was getting a little tired of the Wild West bit. “Now look, Tonaka! I am cooperating. I am a friend of your father and I’ll help, even if I don’t like the way you’re going about things. But let’s cut out all this crazy—”

“Hands up! Keep them high in the air! March into the bedroom.”

He marched. Hands high in the air. Tonaka followed him into the room, keeping at a professional distance. Trooping in behind came Kato, Mato and Sato.

He visualized another headline: Carter Gang-raped by Girl Scouts

Tonaka moved the pistol toward the bed. “You will please to get on the bed, Mr. Carter. Drop your robe. You will lie face up.”

Nick stared. The words he had spoken to Hawk only yesterday came back and he repeated them. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

No smile on any of the pale lemon-brown faces. Dark slant eyes all attentive on him and his big body.

“No kidding, Mr. Carter. On the bed. At once!” The pistol moved in her small hand. Her trigger finger was white around the knuckle. Nick understood, for the first time during all these fun and games it really percolated down, that she would shoot him unless he did exactly as he was told. Exactly.

He dropped the robe. Kato hissed. Mato smiled darkly. Sato giggled. Tonaka gave them a nasty glance and they got back to business. But there was approval in her own dark eyes as they swept briefly up and down his trim two hundred pounds. She nodded. “A magnificent body, Mr. Carter. As my father said it would be. He remembers well how much he taught you and how he conditioned you. At another time, perhaps—but that is not important now. On the bed. Face up.”

Nick Carter was embarrassed and self-conscious. He was not a liar, especially to himself, and he admitted it. There was something so unnatural, even a little obscene, in lying fully exposed to the probing eyes of four Girl Scouts. Four pairs of epicanthoid eyes that were not missing a thing.

One thing for which he was thankful—it was not a sexy situation, far from it, and he was in no danger of having a physical reaction. He shuddered inwardly. A slow rising to crest in front of all those eyes. It was unthinkable. Sato would have giggled.

Nick watched Tonaka steadily. She kept the pistol on his belly, so fully exposed now, and her mouth twitched in a beginning smile. She fought it back successfully.

“I only regret,” said Nick Carter, “that I have but one virtue to give for my country.”

Suppressed mirth from Kato. Tonaka glared at her. Silence. Tonaka glowered at Nick. "You, Mr. Carter, are a fool!"

"Sans doute."

Beneath his left buttock he could feel the hard metal of the zipper set into the mattress. Therein lay the Luger, that nasty hot rod of a gun, a stripped-down 9mm of murder. Also the stiletto. Thirsty Hugo. Death's needlepoint. Nick sighed and forgot it. He could probably get to them, so what? What then? Shoot down four little Girl Scouts from Japan? And why did he keep thinking of them as Girl Scouts? The uniforms were authentic but that was all. They were four female maniacs from some Tokyo yo-yo academy. And he was in the middle. Grin and suffer.

Tonaka was snapping orders. "Kato—look in the kitchen. Sato, in the closets, Mato—ah, that is it. Those ties will be just the thing."

Mato had a handful of Nick's best and most expensive ties, among them the Sulka he had worn only once. He sat up in protest. "Hey! If you've got to use ties use old ones. I just—"

Tonaka rapped him smartly across the forehead with the pistol. She was fast. In and out before he could snatch at the gun.

"Lie down," she snapped. "Quietly. No more talking. We must get on with our work. Already there has been too much foolishness—our plane leaves in an hour."

Nick lifted his head. "I agree about the foolishness. I—"

Another rap across the forehead. He lay sullen as they tied him to the bedposts. They were very good at knots. He could have broken the bonds at any time, but again to what purpose? That was part of this whole crazy deal—he found himself more and more not wanting to hurt them. And, since he was already so deep in Goofyville, he now had a genuine curiosity to find out just what they were up to.

It was a picture he would carry to the grave. Nick Carter tied with his own ties, spread-eagled on his bed, mother naked and exposed to the dark stares of four little maidens from the Orient. A snatch of a favorite old song drifted through his mind: they'll never believe me.

He could hardly believe what he saw next. Feathers. Four long red feathers produced from somewhere under the miniskirts.

Tonaka and Kato were on one side of the bed, Mato and Sato on the other. If they all get close enough, Nick thought, I can snap these ties and bash their stupid little heads together and—

Tonaka dropped her feather and stepped back, the Nambu back in position on his flat stomach. Professionalism had reasserted itself. She nodded curtly at Sato. "Gag him."

"Now look here," said Nick Carter. "I—guh— ummm—phummmp —" A clean handkerchief and another of his ties did the trick.

"Start," said Tonaka. "Kato, you take his feet. Mato, you work on

his armpits. Sato—the genitals.”

Tonaka stepped back another few paces and kept the gun steady on Nick. She permitted herself a smile. “I am rather sorry, Mr. Carter, that we must do it this way. I know it is undignified and ridiculous.”

Nick nodded vigorously. “Hummmmpfff—guuuu— noggleuuppp—”

“Try to bear up, Mr. Carter. It should not take long. We are going to drug you, you see, and one of the propensities of this drug is that it maintains and extends the mood of the person to whom it is given, at the time it is given. We want you happy, Mr. Carter. We want you laughing all the way to Japan!”

He had known all along that there was method in this madness. The ultimate perception changed nothing. They would still kill him if he resisted. This Tonaka kid was just crazy enough to do it. And now it was getting past the point of resistance. Those feathers! It was an old Chinese torture and he had never realized how efficacious it was. It was the sweetest agony in all the world.

Sato was running the feather ever so gently around his privates. Nick convulsed. Mato worked industriously on his armpits. Ohhhhaaahaaaaa—

Kato was using a long expert stroke on the soles of his feet. Nick’s toes began to curl and cramp. He couldn’t, goddam it, stand much more of this. Anyway he had played along with this nutty quartet far enough. Any second now he was just going to have to —ahhhhooo— eeeee—bust loose and let the stuff hit the fan and maybe hurt some of these cute little— ehhyaaaaaaa—crazies and maybe get shot with that little Nambu and eeeyaahooooaaaaa—

Her timing was perfect. He had been distracted just long enough for her to get down to the real business. The needle. The long shining needle. Nick saw it, and then he didn’t see it. Because it was buried in the relatively soft tissue of his right buttock.

The needle went deep. Deeper. Tonaka was staring down at him as she jammed the plunger home. She smiled. Nick arched and laughed and laughed and laughed.

The drug hit him hard, almost instantly. His bloodstream picked it up and raced it along to his brain and motor centers.

They had stopped tickling him now. Tonaka smiled down and patted his face with a soft hand. She put the little pistol away.

“There,” she said. “How do you feel now? All happy?”

Nick Carter smiled. “Never better in my life.” He laughed. “You know something—I feel like having a drink. Like having a lot of drinks. What do you say, girls? Let’s all go out and get blasted.”

Tonaka clapped her hands. How demure and sweet she was, Nick thought. How nice. He wanted to make her happy. He would do

anything she wanted to— anything.

“I think that will be splendid fun,” said Tonaka. “Don’t you, girls?”

Kato, Sato and Mato all thought it would be splendid. They clapped their little hands and giggled and they all, each one, insisted on kissing Nick. Then they stood back, giggling and smiling and talking. Tonaka did not kiss him.

“You had better get dressed, Nick. Quickly. You know we have to get to Japan.”

Nick sat up as they untied him. He laughed. “Of course. I was forgetting. Japan. But are you sure you really want to go, Tonaka? We could have a lot of fun right here in Washington.”

Tonaka came close to him. She bent and kissed him, pressing her mouth to his for a long time. She smoothed his cheek. “Of course I want to go to Japan, Nick, darling. Hurry now. We’ll help you get dressed and packed. You just tell us where things are.”

He felt like a king as he sat naked on the bed and watched them scurry around. Japan was going to be a lot of fun. It had been a long time, too long, since he had had a real vacation like this. Without any responsibilities at all. Free as air. He might even send Hawk a post card. Or maybe not. To hell with Hawk.

Tonaka was riffling through a dresser drawer. “Where is your diplomatic passport, Nick, darling?”

“In the closet, honey, in the lining of the Knox hat box. Let’s hurry, shall we! Japan is calling.”

And then, suddenly, he wanted that drink again. Wanted it worse than he had ever wanted a drink in his life. He snatched a pair of white boxer trunks from Sato, who was packing a suitcase, and went into the living room and took a bottle of Scotch from the portable bar.

Chapter 4

Very rarely did Hawk call Nick in for consultation on a top level decision. Killmaster wasn't paid to make top level decisions. He was paid to carry them out—which he usually did with the stealth of a tiger and the fury thereof when it was needed. Hawk had every respect for Nick's abilities as an agent and, when need be, a killer. Carter was just about the best in the world today; top man in that bitter, dark, bloody and often mysterious back alley region where decisions were implemented, where directives were finally transmuted into bullets and knives, poisons and rope. And death.

Hawk had a very bad night. He hardly slept, most unusual for him. At three in the morning he found himself pacing his slightly dreary living room in Georgetown and wondering if he had the right to involve Nick in this decision. It wasn't Nick's load, really. It was Hawk's. Hawk was the head man at AXE. Hawk was paid—not enough—to make the decisions and bear the onus of mistakes. On his own stooped, seventy-odd-year-old shoulders lay the burden and he really had no right to shift part of that burden to another.

Why not simply make up his mind whether to play Cecil Aubrey's game or not? It was a shabby game, admittedly, but Hawk had played at worse. And the gains were beyond measuring—a man of his own in the Kremlin. Hawk, professionally speaking, was a greedy man. Also a ruthless one. In time—though he kept speculation at a distance now—he knew that he would find means to gradually take over the Kremlin man, more and more, from Aubrey. But that was all in the future.

Had he the right to involve Nick Carter—who had never killed a man in his life except for his country and in the performance of his sworn duty? Because it would be Nick Carter who would have to do the actual killing.

It was a tricky moral question. Slippery. It had a million facets and it was possible to rationalize and come up with almost any answer you wanted.

David Hawk was not accustomed to tricky moral questions. For forty years he had fought the good fight and had put hundreds of his and his country's enemies under the sod. To Hawk's mind they were one and the same thing. His enemies and his country's enemies were exactly the same thing. Interchangeable.

On the surface it was simple enough. He, and the entire Western world, would be safer and sleep better with Richard Philston dead. Philston was an arch-betrayer who had caused unlimited damage. There was really no arguing with that.

So, at three in the morning, Hawk made himself a very mild drink and argued with it.

Aubrey was going against orders. He had admitted as much in Hawk's office, though he had given specious reasons for going against his orders. His superiors wanted Philston taken and brought back to face a proper trial and, one supposed, execution.

Cecil Aubrey, though wild horses would not have dragged it from him, was afraid that Philston would somehow slip the hangman's knot. Aubrey was thinking as much of his dead young wife as he was of his duty. He did not care about seeing a traitor punished in open court. He only wanted Richard Philston dead in the shortest, quickest, ugliest way possible. To do this, and to obtain AXE help in gaining his revenge, Aubrey was prepared to bargain away one of his nation's most valuable assets—an unsuspected pipeline into the Kremlin.

Hawk freshened his drink just a mite and clutched his faded bathrobe around a neck that got scrawnier every day. He glanced at the ancient ormolu clock on the mantel. Nearly four. He had promised himself a decision before he got to the office that day. Had promised Cecil Aubrey, too.

Aubrey was right about one thing, Hawk admitted as he paced. AXE, almost any Yank service, could handle this matter better than the British. Philston would know every gin and snare that M16 had ever used or dreamed of using. AXE might have a chance. Certainly if he used Nick Carter. If Nick couldn't do it, it couldn't be done.

Could he use Nick in a private vendetta for another man? The problem made no attempt to go away or to solve itself. It was still there when Hawk at last sought his pillow again. The booze had helped a bit and he fell into an uneasy sleep at the first peeping of birds in the forsythia outside his window.

Cecil Aubrey and the M15 man, Terence, were due again Tuesday, in Hawk's office at eleven. Hawk was in the office at a quarter of nine. Delia Stokes was not yet in. Hawk hung up his light raincoat—it was beginning to drizzle outside—and went straight to the phone and called Nick's apartment in the Mayflower.

Hawk had made his decision while driving to the office from Georgetown. He knew he was weaseling a bit and shifting the burden a little after all, but now he could do it with a fairly clear conscience. Tell Nick all the facts, with the Englishmen present, and let Nick make his own decision. It was the best Hawk could do, considering his greed and his temptation. He would be fair. He swore it to himself. If Nick turned down the mission that would be the end of it. Let Cecil Aubrey seek elsewhere for an executioner.

Nick did not answer. Hawk swore and slammed the phone down. He stripped his first cigar of the morning and put it in his mouth. He

tried Nick's apartment again, letting the ring go on and on. No answer.

Hawk slammed the phone down again and stood glaring at it. Screwing again, he thought. Shacked up. In the hay with some beautiful doll and he'll report in when he gets damned good and ready. Hawk scowled, then nearly smiled. Couldn't blame the boy for reaping his rosebuds while he could. It didn't last long, God knew. Not long enough. Been a long time since he'd been able to reap any rosebuds. Ah, golden girls and lads alike must come to dust—

To hell with that! When Nick did not answer on the third attempt Hawk went out to look at the logbook on Delia's desk. The night duty officer was supposed to keep it updated. Hawk ran his finger down the list of neatly penned entries. Carter, as were all top AXE men, was on call twenty-four hours a day and was supposed to call in and check every twelve hours. And to leave an address or phone number where they could be reached.

Hawk's finger stopped on the entry: N3—2204 hrs. — 914-528-6177—It was a Maryland prefix. Hawk scribbled the number on a scratch sheet and went back into his own office. He dialed the number.

After a long series of rings a woman said, "Hello?" She sounded sleepy and hungover.

Hawk barged straight into it. Let's get Romeo out of the sack.

"Let me speak to Mr. Carter, please."

Long pause. Then, coldly, "To whom did you wish to speak?"

Hawk bit his cigar savagely. "Carter. Nick Carter! This is very important. Urgent. Is he there?"

More silence. Then he heard her yawn. Her voice was still cold as she said, "I'm sorry. Mr. Carter left some time ago. I really don't know when. But how on earth did you get this number? I—"

"Sorry, lady." Hawk snapped the phone down again. Damn! He sat down, put his feet on the desk and stared at the bilious puce walls. The Western Union clock ticked in defense of Nick Carter. He wasn't overdue on his call in. Still some forty odd minutes to go. Hawk swore under his breath and could not understand his own unease.

Delia Stokes came in a few minutes later. Hawk, masking his anxiety—for which he could produce no good reason—set her to ringing the Mayflower every ten minutes. He got on another line and began making discreet inquiries. Nick Carter, as Hawk well knew, was a swinger and his range of acquaintances was long and catholic. He might be in a Turkish bath with a senator, having breakfast with the wife and/or daughter of some diplomatic VIP—or he might be in a crap game in Goat Hill.

Time passed without results. Hawk kept glancing at the clock on

the wall. He had promised Aubrey a decision today. Goddamn the boy anyway! He was now officially overdue on his call in. Not that Hawk gave a damn about a niggeling matter like that—but he wanted to get this affair settled, one way or the other, and he couldn't do it without Nick. He was as determined as ever that Nick have the final say-so in killing, or not killing, Richard Philston.

At ten of eleven Delia Stokes came into his office, a puzzled look on her face. Hawk was just tossing away a half-masticated cigar. He saw her expression and said, "What?"

Delia shrugged. "I don't know exactly what, sir. But I don't believe it—and you're not going to believe it."

Hawk scowled. "Try me."

Delia cleared her throat. "I finally got on to the bell captain at the Mayflower. I had a hard time finding him, and then he didn't want to talk—he likes Nick and was trying to protect him, I suppose—but I finally wormed something out of him. Nick left the hotel a little after nine this morning. He was drunk. Roaring drunk. And—this is the part you won't believe—he was with four Girl Scouts."

The cigar drooped. Hawk stared at her. "He was with who?"

"I told you—he was with four Girl Scouts. Japanese Girl Scouts. He was so drunk that the scouts, the Japanese Girl Scouts, had to help him through the lobby."

All Hawk did was blink. Three times. Then he said: "Who have we got standing by for local duty?"

"There's Tom Ames. And—"

"Ames will do. Send him over to the Mayflower right away. Get that bell captain's story confirmed or denied. Put a top hush on this, Delia, and start the routine procedure for missing operatives. That's all. Oh, when Cecil Aubrey and Terence show up let them come straight in."

"Yes, sir." She went out and closed the door. Delia knew when to leave David Hawk alone with his bitter thoughts.

Tom Ames was a good man. Careful, thoroughgoing, overlooking nothing. It was one o'clock when he reported back to Hawk. In the meantime Hawk had stalled Aubrey once again—and had been keeping the wires hot. So far nothing.

Ames sat in the same hard chair Nick Carter had occupied yesterday morning. Ames was a rather sad-looking man with a face that reminded Hawk of a lonely bloodhound.

"It's true about the Girl Scouts, sir. There were four of them. Japanese Girl Scouts. They were selling cookies in the hotel. It isn't allowed, normally, but the assistant manager let them slip through. Good neighbor relations and all that. And they did sell some cookies. I —"

Hawk restrained himself, barely. “Skip the cookies, Ames. Stick to Carter. He left with these Girl Scouts? He was seen going through the lobby with them? He was drunk?”

Ames swallowed. “Well, yes, sir. He was certainly noticed, sir. He fell down three times getting through the lobby. He had to be helped up by the, er, Girl Scouts. Mr. Carter was singing and dancing, sir, and yelling a little. It also appears that he had a lot of cookies, sorry, sir, but that’s the way I got it—he had a lot of cookies and he was trying to sell them in the lobby.”

Hawk closed his eyes. This profession got nuttier every day. “Go on.”

“That’s about it, sir. That’s what happened. Well confirmed. I got statements from the bell captain, the assistant manager, two chamber maids and a Mr. and Mrs. Meredith Hunt who were just checking in from Indianapolis. I—”

Hawk held up a hand that trembled slightly. “Skip that, too. Where did Carter and his—his entourage go after that? I presume they didn’t soar away in a balloon or anything sensible like that?”

Ames shoved his sheaf of depositions back into an inner pocket.

“No, sir. They took a taxi.”

Hawk opened his eyes and looked expectant. “Well?”

“Nothing, sir. The usual routine didn’t turn up anything. The bell captain watched the Girl Scouts help Mr. Carter into the taxi, but he didn’t notice anything in particular about the driver, and he didn’t think to get the license number. I talked to the other drivers in the rank, of course. Bad luck there. There was only one other cab there at the time and the driver was napping. He did notice it, though, because Mr. Carter was making so much noise and, well, it was a little unusual to see Girl Scouts with a drunk.”

Hawk sighed. “A little, yes. So?”

“It was a strange cab, sir. The man said he’d never seen it around the rank before. He didn’t get a good look at the driver.”

“Just as well,” said Hawk. “It was probably the Japanese Sand Man.”

“Sir?”

Hawk waved a hand. “Nothing. Okay, Ames. That’s all for now. Stand by for new orders.”

Ames left. Hawk sat staring at the puce walls. On the face of it Nick Carter was now contributing to the delinquency of minors. Four minors. Girl Scouts!

Hawk reached for the phone, intent on putting out a special AXE APB, then drew back his hand. No. Let it cook awhile. See what happened.

One thing he was sure of. It was just the opposite of how it looked.

Those Girl Scouts were, somehow, contributing to the delinquency of Nick Carter.

Chapter 5

The little man with the mallet was merciless. He was a dwarf and he wore dirty brown robes and he swung a mean mallet. The gong was twice as big as the little man, but the little man had big muscles and he meant business. He swung the mallet again and again against the sounding brass—boingggg—boingggg—boingggg—boingggg—

Funny thing. The gong was changing shape. It was beginning to look exactly like Nick Carter's head. BOINGGGGGG—BOINGGGGGGG Nick opened his eyes, then closed them as fast as possible. The gong started again. He opened his eyes and the gong stopped. He was lying on the floor, on a futon, with a quilt over him. Near his head was a white enameled pot. Foresight on someone's part. Nick got his head over the pot and was sick in it. Very sick. For a long time. When he had retched himself empty he lay back on the floor pad and tried to get the ceiling in focus. It was just an ordinary ceiling. Gradually it stopped whirling and settled down. He began to hear music. Frenetic, far-away, stamping go-go- music. It was, he thought as his head cleared, not so much a matter of sound as of vibration.

The door opened and Tonaka came in. No Girl Scout uniform now. She was wearing a brown suede jacket over a white silk blouse—obviously with no bra under it—and tight black slacks that clung with love to her slim legs. She was slightly made up, lipstick and a trace of rouge, and her lustrous black hair was piled with feigned carelessness atop her head. She was, Nick admitted even in his agony, quite a dish.

Tonaka gave him a quiet smile. "Good evening, Nick. How are you feeling?"

He touched his head tenderly with his fingers. It didn't fall off.

"I just might live," he said. "No thanks to you."

She laughed. "I'm sorry, Nick. I really am. But it seemed the only way to carry out my father's wishes. The drug we gave you—it not only makes a person extremely docile, it also gives him an enormous thirst, desire, for alcohol. You were really quite drunk even before we got you on the plane."

He stared at her. It was all flooding back now. He rubbed the back of his neck gingerly. "I know it's a stupid question—but where am I?"

Her smile vanished. "In Tokyo, of course."

"Of course. Where else. Where are the gruesome threesome—Mato, Kato and Sato?"

"They have their work. They are doing it. I doubt that you will see them again."

"I think I can bear that," he muttered.

Tonaka knelt on the futon beside him. She ran her hand over his forehead and stroked his hair. Her hand was as cool as a Fuji brook. Her soft mouth brushed his, then she pulled away.

"There is no time for us now, but I will say this. I promise it. If you help my father, as I know you will, and if we both live through this, I will do anything to make up to you what I have done. Anything! That is understood, Nick?"

He was feeling enormously better. He restrained the impulse to pull her slim body down atop his own. He nodded. "Understood, Tonaka. I will hold you to that promise. Now—where is your father?"

She stood up and moved away from him. "He lives in the Sanya district. You know it?"

He nodded. One of the worst slum areas in Tokyo. But he did not understand. What was old Kunizo Matu doing in such a place?

Tonaka guessed his thought. She was lighting a cigarette. She flung the match carelessly on the tatami.

"I told you my father is dying. He has cancer. He has come back to die with his own people, the Eta. You knew he was Burakumin?"

He shook his head. "I had no idea. Does it matter?"

He had thought her beautiful. The beauty vanished now as she scowled. "He thought it mattered. He left his people long ago and passed as a non-Eta. Now that he is old and dying, he wants to make amends." She shrugged fiercely. "Perhaps it is not too late at that—this is certainly the time for it. But he will explain all that to you. Then we will see—I think now that you had better take a bath and get cleaned up. It will help your sickness. We have a little time. A few hours until morning."

Nick stood up. His shoes were missing but otherwise he was fully clothed. The Savile Row suit was never going to be the same. He did feel grimy and had the beginnings of a stubble. He knew what his tongue must look like and he did not want to face it. There was a distinct taste of ditch digger's glove in his mouth.

"A bassu might just save my life," he admitted.

She pointed to his crumpled suit. "You'll have to change clothes anyway. That will have to be gotten rid of. It's all arranged. We have other clothes for you. Papers, A whole new cover. My father worked it out, of course."

"Father seems to have been very busy. And just who are we?"

She threw a Japanese phrase at him that he did not catch. Her long dark eyes narrowed. "It means Militant Women of Eta. It's what we are—wives, daughters, mothers. Our men won't fight, or very few of them, so the women must. But he will tell you all about that, too. I'll send a girl about your bath."

"Hold it a minute, Tonaka." He was hearing the music again. Music

and vibrations, very faint.

"Where are we? Where in Tokyo?"

She flicked ashes on the tatami. "On the Ginza. Under it, rather. This is one of our few safe hideouts. We're in a sub-basement under the Electric Palace cabaret. That's the music you hear—go-go and girls. It's nearly midnight up there and the joint is jumping. Now I really must go, Nick. Anything you want—"

"Cigarettes, a bottle of good hair of the dog and to know where you got your English. I haven't heard a 'prease' now for a long time."

She could not repress the smile. It made her lovely again. "Radcliffe. Class of '68. Father didn't want to raise his daughter to be an Eta, you see. Only I insisted. But he'll tell you about that, too. I'll send the things. And the bassu girl. See you soon, Nick."

She closed the door behind her. Nick, who was nothing if not adaptable, squatted in Oriental fashion and started thinking it out. There would, of course, be all hell to pay in Washington. Hawk would be getting the torture chamber ready. He decided to play the cards as they had fallen, at least for the time being. He could not contact Hawk at once, not tell the old man that his wandering boy had wandered to Tokyo. No. Let the boss have his apoplexy. Hawk was a tough, stringy old bird and it wouldn't kill him.

Meantime Nick would see Kunizo Matu and find out what it was all about. Pay his debt to the old fellow, get this whole infernal mess straightened out. Then would be time enough to call Hawk and try to explain.

There was a tap on the door.

"Ohari nasai." It was fortunate, , as long as he had to be shanghaied, that he spoke the language.

She was middle-aged with a flat placid face. She wore straw getas and a gingham house dress. She carried a tray with a bottle of whisky and a package of cigarettes on it. Over her arm she carried a huge fluffy towel. She gave Nick an aluminum toothed smile.

"Konbanwa, Carter-san. Here are things for you. Bassu is ready now. You come hubba-hubba?"

Nick smiled at her. "Not hubba-hubba. Drink first. Smoke first. Then maybe I won't die and can enjoy bassu. O namae wa?"

The aluminum teeth glinted. "I Suzy."

He took the bottle of whisky from the tray and grimaced. Old White Whale! About what you could expect in a place called the Electric Palace.

"Suzy, eh? That figures. You bring a glass?"

"No grass."

"That figures, too." He twisted the top off the bottle. The stuff smelled bad. But he needed one, just one, to get him off and running

on this—this whatever it was mission. He held out the bottle and bowed to Suzy. “Your health, beautiful. Gokenko wo shuku shimasu!” And mine, too, he muttered under his breath. He had a sudden, sure knowledge that the fun and games were about over. From now on in the game would be for keeps and the winner kept all the marbles.

Suzy giggled, then frowned. “Bassu ready now. Hot. You come fast or be cold.” And she flapped the big towel suggestively in the air.

It was of no avail to explain to Suzy that he could scrub his own back. Suzy was boss. She popped him into the steaming tank and took over, giving him a bassu her way, not his. She missed nothing.

Tonaka was waiting when he got back to the little room. There was a pile of clothing on the bed mat Nick regarded the clothes with distaste. “What am I supposed to be? A bum?”

“In a way, yes.” She handed him a battered wallet. It contained a thick wad of crisp new yen and a great many cards, most of them limp and dogeared. Nick riffled hastily through them.

“Your name is Pete Fremont,” Tonaka explained. “You are sort of a bum, I suppose. You’re a free-lance newspaper man and writer, an alcoholic, and you’ve been on the beach in the Orient for years. Now and then you sell a story or an article in the States and when the check gets here you go on a binge. That’s where the real Pete Fremont is now—on a binge. So you don’t have to worry about that. There won’t be two of you running around. Now you had better get dressed.”

She handed him a pair of shorts and a light blue shirt, cheap and new, still in their cellophane packets. “I had one of the girls buy these. Pete’s stuff is pretty filthy. He doesn’t take very good care of himself.”

Nick dropped the skimpy robe Suzy had given him and got into the shorts. Tonaka watched impassively. She had, he remembered, seen it all before. No secrets from this kid.

“So there really is a Pete Fremont, eh? And you guarantee to keep him out of circulation while I operate? That’s fine—but there is another angle. Everybody in Tokyo must know a character like that.”

She was lighting a cigarette. “Keeping him out of sight won’t be any problem. He’s dead drunk. He’ll stay that way for days, as long as his money holds out. He couldn’t go anyplace anyway—these are his only clothes.”

Nick halted his task of taking pins out of the new shirt, “You mean you stole the guy’s clothes? His only clothes?”

Tonaka shrugged. “Why not? We need them. He doesn’t. Pete is a sweet guy, he knows about us, about Eta girls, and he helps us now and then. But he’s a hopeless lush. Anyway he’s shackled up now and he doesn’t need any clothes. He’s got his bottle and his girl and that is all he cares about. Do hurry, Nick. I want to show you something.”

“Yes, mem sahib.”

Gingerly he picked up the suit. It had been a good suit once. It had been made in Hong Kong—Nick knew the tailor—a very long time ago. He got into it, noticing the very distinctive odor of sweat and age. It fitted amazingly well. “Your friend Pete is a big man.”

“Fat now.” ‘

Nick put on shoes that were cracked and rundown at the heel. The tie was ragged and stained. The trenchcoat she handed him had, in the Ice Age, come from Abercrombie and Fitch. It was filthy and lacked a belt.

“This guy,” Nick muttered as he shrugged into the trenchcoat, “is real type casting. Brother—how does he stand his own smell?”

Tonaka did not smile. “I know. Poor Pete. But when you’ve been fired by the UP, the AP, the Hong Kong Times and the Singapore Times and by Asahi, Yomi-uri and the Osaka, I guess you don’t much care any more. Here. The hat.”

Nick regarded it with awe. It was a masterpiece. It had been new when the world was young. Filthy, dented, ragged, sweat-stained and shapeless, still it flaunted a bedraggled scarlet feather in the salt-rimed band. A last gesture of defiance, a final cocking the snook at Fate.

“I’d like to meet this Pete Fremont when this thing is over,” he told the girl. “He must be a walking example of the law of survival.” Something Nick was pretty good at himself.

“Maybe,” she agreed curtly. “Stand over there and let me look at you. Hmmmmmm—you’ll pass for Pete at a distance. Not close, because you don’t look anything alike. That’s not really important. His papers are important, as your cover, and I doubt you’ll meet anyone that knows Pete well. Father says you won’t. This is all his plan, remember. I’m only carrying out my instructions.”

Nick narrowed his eyes at her. “You don’t like your old man very much, do you?”

Her face went as stiff as a kabuki mask. “I honor my father. I do not have to love him. Come now. There is something you must see. I have saved it until the last because—because I want you to leave this place in the proper frame of mind. And on your guard.”

“I know,” said Nick as he followed her out the door. “You’re a great little psychologist.”

She led him down a corridor to a flight of narrow stairs. Somewhere over his head the go-go music was still dinning away. Imitation Beades. Clyde-san and his Four Silk Worms. Nick Carter shook his head in silent disapproval as he followed Tonaka down the stairs. Mod music left him cold. He was by no means an old gent, but he wasn’t that young. Nobody was that young!

They went down and down. It grew colder and he heard the trickle of water. Tonaka was using a small flashlight now.

“How many basements does this joint have?”

“Many. This part of Tokyo is very old. We’re directly under what used to be the old silver foundry. Gin. They used these dungeons to store bullion and coins.”

They reached bottom, then went along a transverse corridor to a dark cubicle. The girl flicked a switch and a dim yellow bulb starred the ceiling. She pointed to the body on a plain deal table in the center of the room.

“Father wanted you to see that. First. Before you committed yourself irrevocably.” She handed him the flashlight. “Here. Take a good look. It’s what will happen to us if we fail”

Nick took the flashlight. “I thought I was committed.”

“Not totally. Father says not. If, at this point, you want to back out we are to put you on the next plane back to the States.”

The AXEman scowled, then grinned sourly. Old Kunizo knew what he was about. He knew that Carter might be a lot of things, but chicken wasn’t one of them.

He put the glow of the flashlight on the body and examined it with an expert eye. He was familiar enough with corpses and death to know at once that the man had died in exquisite agony.

The body was that of a Japanese of middle age. Squat, powerful, graying at the temples. The eyes had been closed. Nick examined the many small wounds that covered the man from neck to ankles. There must be a thousand of them! Small, bloody, gaping little mouths in the flesh. None deep enough to kill of itself. None in a vital spot. But put them all together and a man would slowly bleed to death. It would take hours. And there would be the terror, the shock—

Tonaka was standing well back in the shadows cast by the tiny yellow bulb. The waft of her cigarette came to him, acrid and harsh in the cold death smell of the room.

She said: “You see the tattoo?”

He was looking at it. It puzzled him. A small blue figure of Buddha—with knives sticking into it. It was on the left arm, inside, above the elbow.

“I see it,” Nick said. “What does it mean?”

“The Society of the Bloody Buddha. His name was Sadanaga. He was Eta, Burdkumin. Like myself—and my father. Like millions of us. But the Chinese, the Chicoms, forced him to join the Society and work for them. But Sadanaga was a brave man—he rebelled and worked for us, too. He informed on the Chicoms.”

Tonaka flipped away her glowing cigarette butt “They found out. You see the result. And that Mr. Carter, is what you will be up against if you help us. And that is only part of it.”

Nick stepped back and ran the flashlight over the body again. The

mute little wounds gaped at him. He flicked off the light and turned back to the girl. "It looks like the death of a thousand cuts—but I thought that went out with the Romans."

"The Chinese have brought it back. Updated, in modern form. You will see. My father has a model of the machine they use to—to punish anyone who defies them. Come. It is cold down here."

They went back to the little room where Nick had awakened. The music was still banging and strumming and vibrating. He had somehow lost his wrist-watch.

It was, Tonaka told him, a quarter after two.

"I don't feel like sleep," he said. "I might as well cut out right now and go see your father. Call and tell him I'm on my way."

"He has no phone. It is not wise. But I will get a message to him in time. Perhaps you are right—it is easier to move around Tokyo in the small hours. But wait—if you are going now I must give you this. I know it is not what you are accustomed to—my father remembers—but it is all we have. Weapons are hard to come by for us Eta."

She went to a small cabinet in one corner of the room and knelt before it. The slacks tightened over a smooth line of thigh and buttock, limning the taut flesh.

She came back with a heavy pistol that glinted black with an oily sheen. She handed it to him along with two spare clips. "It is very heavy. I could not use it myself. It has been hidden away since occupation days. I think it is in good condition. I suppose some GI traded it for cigarettes and beer, or a girl."

It was an old Colt .45, 1911. Nick had not fired one for a long time but he was familiar with it. The weapon was notoriously inaccurate at over fifty yards, but within that range it would stop a bull elephant It had, in fact, been developed to stop amoks in the Philippines.

He released the full clip and pumped the sleeve several times, checked the safeties, then thumbed cartridges onto the bed pad. They lay thick and blunt and deadly, the brass shimmering in the light. Nick checked the feeder springs in all the clips. They would do. Just as the old .45 would have to do—it wasn't Wilhelmina, of course, but then no other gun was. And he could have done with the stiletto, Hugo, nestling along his right arm in the chamois spring sheath, but that was out. He had to use the tools at hand. He jammed the Colt into his waistband and buttoned the trenchcoat over it. It bulged, but not too much.

Tonaka was watching him closely. He sensed her approval in her dark eyes. The girl was, in fact, feeling more optimistic about matters. She knew a professional when she saw one.

She handed him a small leather keyfold. "There is a Datsun in the parking lot behind the San-ai Department store. You know it?"

"I know it." It was a tubular building not far down the Ginza, resembling a massive rocket on its pad.

"Good. Here is the license number." She handed him a slip of paper. "The car may be watched. I don't think so, but it may be. You will just have to take that chance. You know how to get out to the Sanya district?"

"I think so. Take the Freeway to Showa Don, then come off and go as far as the baseball stadium. Cut right on Meiji Dori and that should get me somewhere around the Namidabashi Bridge. Right?"

She came closer to him. "Pretty right. You know Tokyo well."

"Not as well as I should, but I can make out. It's like New York—they keep tearing it down and building it again."

Tonaka was closer now, nearly touching him. Her smile was sad. "Not in the Sanya district—that is still slums. You will probably have to leave the car near the bridge and walk in. The streets aren't much."

"I know." He had seen slums the world over. Seen them and smelled them—the dung and the filth and the human garbage. The dogs that ate their own excreta. The babies that would never have a chance and the old waiting to die without dignity. Kunizo Matu, who was Eta, Burakumin, must feel very strongly about his people to return to a place like Sanya to die.

She was in his arms. She pressed her slim body against his big hard one. He was surprised to see tears glistening in the long, almond-shaped eyes.

"Go, then," she told him. "God be with you. I have done all I can, obeyed my honorable father in every detail. You will give him my—my respects?"

Nick held her gendy. She was trembling and there was a faint scent of sandalwood about her hair.

"Just your respects? Not your love?"

She would not look at him. She shook her head. "No. Just as—as I say. But do not think of that—it is between my father and me. You and I—we are different" She pulled a little away from him. "I have a promise to keep, Nick. I depend on you to make me do so."

"I will."

He kissed her. Her mouth was fragrant, soft, as moist and yielding as a rosebud. As he had suspected she was not wearing a bra, and he felt the swell of her breasts against him. For the moment they melded, shoulder to knee, and her trembling increased and her breathing roughened. Then she pushed him away. "No! We must not. That is all—come, I will show you how to leave this place. Do not bother to memorize it—you will not be coming back here."

As they were leaving the room a thought struck him. "How about that body?"

“That is our concern. It will not be the first we have disposed of—when the time is right we will put it into the harbor.”

Five minutes later Nick Carter felt the light touch of April rain on his face. Hardly more than a mist, really, and it was cool and soothing after the confines of that basement. There was a hint of damp chill in the air and he buttoned the old trenchcoat about his throat.

Tonaka had led him into an alley. Overhead the dark turbid sky reflected the glare of the Ginza's neon lights half a block away. It was late but the street was still swinging. As he walked Nick could smell the two odors he identified with Tokyo—hot noodles and freshly poured concrete. To his right was a desolate flattened expanse where a new basement was being dug. The concrete smell was stronger. The cranes in the pit were like sleeping storks in the rain.

He came to a side street and turned back toward the Ginza itself. He came out a block from the Nichi-geki Theater. He paused on the corner and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply and letting his eyes rove and register the frenetic scene. At nearly three in the morning the Ginza was cooling down a bit, but it was not yet dead. Vehicular traffic had thinned, but mobs of people still ebbed and flowed up and down that fantastic street. Noodle vendors still piped. Brash music poured from the thousands of bars. Somewhere a samisen twanged softly. A late-running tram clanged past. Over it all, as though the sky was leaking rivulets of color, washed the bright surf of the neon. Tokyo. Brash, brawling, bastard of the West. Spawned by rape of the dignified maiden of the East.

A ricksha went by, the coolie trotting wearily with his head down. A Yank sailor and a cute Japanese girl were in heavy embrace. Nick smiled and tossed his butt away. You hardly ever saw that any more. Rickshas. They were as old-fashioned as clogs, or the kimono and obi. Young Japan was hip—and there were plenty of hippies.

High on his right, just under the clouds, winked the warning light on Tokyo Tower in Shiba Park. Across the street the bright neon of a Chase Manhattan branch told him, in Japanese and English, that he had a friend. Nick's grin was a little sour. He doubted that C-M was going to be much help in his present situation. He lit a new cigarette and took off. His peripheral vision was excellent and he saw the two neat little cops, blue-uniformed and white-gloved, coming up to his left. They were walking slowly, swinging their batons and talking to each other, casual and harmless enough, but there was no point in taking chances.

Nick went a couple of blocks out of his way, keeping an eye on his back trail. Nothing. He was suddenly very hungry and he stopped at a garishly lit tempura bar and ate a huge dish of vegetables and batter-fried shrimp. He left yen on the stone bar and went out. Nobody was

paying him the slightest attention.

He left the Ginza, walked down a side street and came into the San-ai parking lot from the rear. Sodium lights cast a blue-green haze over the dozen cars there. The black Datsun was where Tonaka had said it would be. He checked the license, twisted the paper into a spill for another cigarette, then got in and drove out of the lot. No lights, no shadow of a following car. So far he appeared to be in the clear.

When he sat, the heavy .45 dug into his groin. He put it on the seat beside him.

He drove carefully, keeping well within the 32-kilometer limit until he was on the new Expressway and heading north. Then he stepped it up to 50 kilometers, which was still within the night limit. He obeyed every traffic sign and signal. The rain increased and he rolled up the driver's window nearly to the top. As the little car grew stuffy he could smell the sweat and dirt odor of Pete Fremont's suit. There was little of the crazy Tokyo traffic at this hour and he saw no police cars. He was thankful. If the cops stopped him, even for a routine check, it was going to be a little tough, looking and smelling the way he did. And there would be the .45 to explain. Nick knew the Tokyo police from past experience. They were tough and efficient—they had also been known to toss a man into the pokey and conveniently forget him for a few days.

He passed Ueno Park on his left. Not far now to the Beisubooru Stadium. He decided to leave the car in the parking lot at the Minowa Station on the Joban line and walk into the Sanya district by way of the Namidabashi Bridge—in the old days they had executed criminals out here by the bridge.

The little suburban station was dark and deserted in the rain-whimpering night. There was one car in the lot, an old jalopy without tires. Nick locked the Datsun, checked the .45 again and thrust it into his belt. He pulled down the beat-up hat, turned up his collar and started trudging into the dark rain. Somewhere a dog howled wearily, a cry of loneliness and despair in that desolate hour before morning. Nick trudged on. Tonaka had given him the flashlight and now and again he used it. Street signs were haphazard, often missing, but he had a general idea of where he was going and his sense of direction was keen.

Once across the Namidabashi Bridge he was in Sanya proper. A faint breeze off the Sumida River bore the industrial stench of the factories lining it. Another smell hung heavy and pungent on the dank air—the odor of old dried blood and rotting guts. Slaughter houses. There were a lot of them in Sanya and he recalled that a great many of the Eta, the Burakumin, were employed in killing animals and skinning them. One of the few nasty jobs open to them as a class.

He came to a corner. He must be close now. There was a row of flophouses here. A paper sign, shielded from the weather and lit by an oil lantern, offered a bed for 20 yen. Five cents.

He was the only man awake in this desolation. Gray rain hissed and spattered gently on the ancient trenchcoat. Nick figured that he must be within a block or so of his destination. It didn't mean much because now he had to admit that he was lost. Unless Tonaka had set up the contact the lead-in man, as she had promised.

"Carter-san?"

A sigh, a whisper, an imagined sound above the weeping of the rain? Nick tensed, put his hand on the cold butt of the .45 and looked around. Nothing. No one.

"Carter-san?"

The voice higher now, reedy, one with the wind. Nick spoke into the night. "Yes. I am Carter-san. Where are you?"

"Over here, Carter-san, between the buildings. Come to the one with the lamp."

Nick eased the Colt out of his belt and slipped it off safety. He walked to where the oil lamp guttered behind the paper sign.

"Here, Carter-san. Look down. Below you."

There was a narrow space between the buildings with three steps leading down. At the foot of the steps a man was crouching beneath a straw rain mat.

Nick halted at the top of the steps. "Can I use a light?"

"For one second only, Carter-san. It is dangerous."

"How do you know I am Carter-san?" Nick whispered.

He could not see the old shoulders shrug beneath the mat, but he guessed at it. "It is a chance I take— but she said you would come. And, if you are Carter-san, I am to direct you to Kunizo Matu. If you are not Carter-san, then you are one of them and you will kill me."

"I am Carter-san. Where is Kunizo Matu?"

He flashed the light down the stairs for an instant. Bright beady eyes reflected the gleam. A wisp of gray hairs, an ancient face seared by time and trouble. He squatted beneath his mat like Time itself. He did not have twenty yen for a bed. Yet he lived, he talked, he helped his people.

Nick doused the light. "Where?"

"Down the stairs, past me, and straight back along the passage. As far as it goes. Be careful of dogs. They sleep here and they are wild and hungry. At the end of this passage there is another passage. Take it to the right—go again as far as you can. It is a large house, larger than you would think, and a red light bums behind the door. Go, Carter-san."

Nick fumbled a crisp bill from Pete Fremont's crummy wallet. He

dropped it beneath the mat as he passed. "Thank you, Papa-san. Here is money. Your old bones will lie easier in a bed."

"Arigato, Carter-san."

"Itashimashite!"

Nick went cautiously along the passage, brushing his fingers against the ramshackle houses on either side. The smell was terrible and he stepped into sticky filth. He accidentally kicked a dog, but the creature only whined and crept away.

He made the turn and kept going for what he reckoned was half a block. The shacks closed in on either side, jumbles of tin and paper and old packing crates—anything that could be salvaged or stolen and used to make a home. Now and then he saw a dim light or heard a baby crying. The rain wept for the inhabitants, the batayu buraku, the rag and bone pickers of life. A lean cat spat at Nick and fled into the night.

He saw it then. A dim red glow behind a paper door. Visible only if you were looking for it He smiled sourly and thought fleetingly of his youth in a midwestern town, where the girls around the Real Sdk factory had actually kept red bulbs glowing in the windows.

The rain, caught suddenly by wind, beat a tattoo on the paper door. Nick rapped lightly. He stepped back a pace, a pace to the right the Colt alert to slam lead into the night The odd sense of fantasy, of unreality, that had been dogging him since he had been drugged, had gone now. He was all AXEman now. He was Killmaster. And he was working.

The paper door slid back with a little sigh, to be filled by a vast bulk in dim silhouette.

"Nick?"

It was the voice of Kunizo Matu and yet it was not. Not the voice as Nick remembered it from the years. It was an old voice, a sick voice, and it repeated: "Nick?"

"Yes, Kunizo. Nick Carter. I understand that you wanted to see me."

Everything considered, Nick thought, it was probably the understatement of the century.

Chapter 6

The house was dimly lit by paper lanterns. "It is not so much that I follow the old customs," said Kunizo Matu as he led the AXEmen into an inner room. "Bad lighting is an asset in this neighborhood. Especially now that I have declared my own private little war on the Chinese Commies. My daughter told you of this?"

"A little," said Nick. "Not too much. She said you would clear up everything. I wish you would. There is a lot that puzzles me."

The room was well proportioned, the furnishings in the Japanese style. Straw mats, a low table on the tatami, flowers on the rice paper wall, soft cushions around the table. On the table were small cups and a bottle of saki.

Matu pointed to a cushion. "You will have to sit on the floor, my old friend. But first—did you bring my medallion? I value it highly and I want it with me when I die." It was a simple statement of fact without sentimentality.

Nick fished the medallion out of a pocket and handed it to him. But for Tonaka he would have forgotten it. She had told him: "The old man will ask for it."

Matu took the gold and jade disc and put it away in a table drawer. He sank down across the table from Nick and reached for the said bottle. "We will not stand on ceremony, my old friend, but there is time for a little drink to remember all the yesterdays. It was good of you to come."

Nick smiled. "I had very little choice, Kunizo. Did she tell you how she and her Girl Scout friends got me here?"

"She told me. She is a most obedient daughter—yet I had not really meant for her to go to such extremes. It may be that I was a little overenthusiastic in my instructions. I merely hoped that she could convince you." He poured said into the eggshell cups.

Nick Carter shrugged "She convinced me. Forget it, Kunizo. I would have come anyway, once I understood the seriousness of the matter. It is just that I may have a little trouble explaining things to my boss."

"David Hawk?" Matu handed him a cup of saki.

"You know that?"

Matu nodded and drank saki. He was still built like a sumo wrestler, but now the fat draped him in robes of flabbiness and his features were too sharp. His eyes were deep set, with huge pouches under them, and they burned with fever and with something else that was consuming him.

He nodded again. "I always knew a great deal more than you suspected, Nick. About you and AXE. You knew me as a friend, and as your karate and judo teacher. I was working for Japanese Intelligence."

"So Tonaka told me."

"Yes. I told her that at last. What she could not tell you, because she does not know—very few people do—is that I was a double agent all those years. I also worked for the British. For MI5."

Nick sipped at his saki. He was not particularly surprised, though it was news to him. He kept his eye on the stubby Swedish K machine gun that Matu had been carrying—it was on the table—and said nothing. Matu had brought him many thousands of miles to talk. When he was ready he would. Nick waited.

Matu was not yet ready to get down to cases. He stared at the said bottle. Rain played a tinny ragtime on the roof. Someone coughed somewhere in the house. Nick cocked an ear and looked at the big man. "A servant. A good boy. We can trust him." Nick refilled his cup with said and lit a cigarette. Matu refused. "My doctor does not permit it. He is a liar and says that I will live a long time." He tapped his huge belly. "I know better, This cancer is eating me alive. My daughter mentioned this?"

"Something of it." The doctor was a liar. Killmaster knew death when it was written on a man's face.

Kunizo Matu sighed. "I give myself six months. It is not much time to do the things I would like. A pity. But then I suppose it is always like that—one stalls and delays and puts off, and then one day Death is there and the time is all gone. I—"

Gendy, very gendy, Nick prodded him. "I understand some of it, Kunizo, Some of it I do not About your people and how you have come back to them, the Burahimin, and that things are not well with you and your daughter. I know you are trying to make amends before you die. You have all my sympathy, Kunizo, and you know that in our profession sympathy is not given easdy and is hard to come by. But we have always been honest and blunt with each other—you must come to the point, Kunizo! What do you want of me?" Matu expelled a long breath. There was about him a peculiar odor and Nick wondered if it was the actual smell of the cancer. He had read that some of them did stink.

"You are right," said Matu. "Just as in the old days —you were usually right. So listen carefully. I told you that I was a double agent, working for both our intelligence and for British MI5. Well, in MI5 I came to know a man by the name of Cecil Aubrey. He was only a junior officer then. Now he is a knight, or soon will be—Sir Cecil Aubrey! Now, even after all these years, I still have many contacts. I

have kept them in good repair, you might say. For an old man, Nick, for a dying man, I know pretty well what goes on in the world. In our world. The espionage underground. A few months ago ...”

Kunizo Matu spoke steadily for half an hour. Nick Carter listened intently, interrupting only now and then to ask a question. Mostly he drank saki, smoked one cigarette after another and fondled the Swedish K machine gun. It was an exquisite piece of machinery.

Kunizo Matu said: “So you see, old friend, it is a complex matter. I no longer have official connections, so I have organized the Eta women and do the best I can. It is frustrating at times. Especially now, when we are confronted with a double plot. I am sure that Richard Philston has not come to Tokyo merely to organize a sabotage campaign and a blackout. There is more to it than that. Much more. It is my humble opinion that the Russians are going to swindle the Chinese somehow, double-cross them and leave them in the soup.”

Nick’s grin was hard. “Old Chinese recipe for Duck soup—first catch duck!”

He had come doubly alert at the first mention of Richard Philston’s name. To catch Philston, even to kill him, would be the coup of the century. It was hard to believe that the man would leave the safety of Russia just to oversee a sabotage ploy, no matter how massive. Kunizo was right about that. It had to be something else.

He filled his said cup again. “You’re positive that Philston is in Tokyo? Now?”

Fat billowed as the old man shrugged his big shoulders. “As positive as one can ever be in this business. Yes. He is here. I had him and then I lost him. He knows all the tricks. It is my belief that even Johnny Chow, who is the leader of the local Chicoms, does not at the moment know where Philston is. And they are supposed to be working closely together.”

“That means Philston has his own people, then. His own organization apart from the Chicoms?”

Again the shrug. “I suppose so. A small group. It would have to be small to avoid attention. Philston will operate on his own. He will have no connection with the Russian Embassy here. If he is caught doing—whatever it is that he intends doing—they will disavow him.”

Nick thought a moment “Their place still at 1 Azabu Mamiana?”

“The same. But it is no good watching their Embassy. For days now my girls have kept a 24-hour watch. Nothing.”

The front door began to slide open. Slowly. An inch at a time. The grooves were well tallowed and the door made no sound.

“So there you are,” said Kunizo Matu. “I can handle the sabotage plot. I can get evidence and, at the last moment, hand it over to the police. They will listen to me because, although I am no longer active,

I can still bring certain pressures to bear. But I can do nothing about Richard Philston and he is the real danger. That game is too big for me. It is why I sent for you, why I sent the medallion, why I ask now what I thought I never would ask. That you pay a debt."

He leaned suddenly over the little table toward Nick. "A debt I never claimed, mind you! It is you, Nick, who has always insisted that you owe me for your life."

"That is true. I do not like debts. I will pay it if I can. You want me to find Richard Philston and kill him?"

Matu's eyes burned at him. "I do not care what you do with him. Kill him. Turn him over to our police, take him back to the States. Give him to the British. It is all one to me."

The front door was open now. A spate of rain drifted in to wet the matting in the hall. The man moved slowly toward the inner room. The pistol glinted dully in his hand.

"MI5 knows that Philston is in Tokyo," said Matu. "I saw to that. I spoke of Cecil Aubrey a moment ago. He knows. He will know what to do."

Nick was not particularly pleased. "That means I might be falling all over British agents. CIA, too, if he asks our help officially. Things could get cluttered. I like to work alone as much as possible."

The man was halfway down the hall now. Carefully, without the betraying snick, he eased the safety off the pistol.

Nick Carter stood up and stretched. He was suddenly bone weary. "All right, Kunizo. We'll leave it at that. I'll try to find Philston. When I leave here I'll be on my own. Just to keep it from getting too fouled up I'm going to forget about this Johnny Chow and the Chinese and the sabotage plot. You handle that angle. I'll concentrate on Philston. When I get him, if I get him, then I'll decide what to do with him. Okay?"

Matu had also risen. He nodded and his chins trembled. "As you say, Nick. Okay. It is best, I think, to concentrate and narrow it down. But now I must show you something. Tonaka let you see the body at the—the place you were first taken?"

The man in the hall, standing in the dark, could see the dim silhouettes of the two men in the inner room. They had just risen from the table. One was stretching.

Nick said: "She did. Gentleman name of Sadanaga. Due to go into the harbor any time now."

Matu went to a small lacquered cabinet in a corner. He stooped with a grunt, his big belly swaying. "Tour memory is as good as ever, Nick, But his name is not important. Not even his death. He is not the first and he will not be the last. But I am glad you saw his body. It, and this, will serve to explain just how rough a game is played by

Johnny Chow and his Chicoms.”

He put the little Buddha on the table. It stood about a foot high and was of bronze. Matu touched it and the front half swung open on minute hinges. Light glinted on the scores of tiny blades set into the inside of the statue.

“They call it the Bloody Buddha,” said Matu. “An old idea brought up to date. And not really Oriental, you see, because it is a version of the Iron Maiden used in Europe in medieval times. They put the victim in the Buddha and close it on him. There are not, of course, really a thousand knives, but does it matter? He bleeds to death very slowly because the blades are arranged very cunningly and none of them stabs too deeply or touches a vital spot. Not a very pleasant death.”

The door to the room slid open the first inch.

Nick had the picture. “The Chicoms force the Eta men into this Society of the Bloody Buddha?”

“Yes.” Matu shook his head sadly. “A few of the Etas stand up to them. Not many. Etas, Burakumin, are a minority and they do not have many ways of fighting back. The Chicoms use jobs, political pressure, money—but mostly terror. They are very clever. They force the men to join the Society by terror, by threats to their wives and children. Then if the men renege, if they find their manhood again and try to fight back—you see what happens.” He pointed to the deadly little Buddha on the table. “So I have turned to the women, and with some success, because the Chicoms have not yet figured out just how to handle the women. I had this model made to show the women, what would happen to them if they are caught”

Nick eased the Colt .45 in his belt, where it was digging into his stomach. “That’s your worry, Kunizo. But I see what you mean—the Chicoms are going to black out Tokyo and bum it down and your people, the Eta, will be blamed.”

The door behind them was half open now.

“The sad truth is, Nick, that many of my people do riot. They do loot and bum, in protest against poverty and discrimination. They are a natural tool for the Chicoms. I try to reason with them, but I do not have much success. My people are very bitter.”

Nick shrugged into the old trenchcoat. “Yes. But that’s your problem Kunizo. Mine is to find Richard Philston. So I’ll go to work, the sooner the better. One thing, though—it might help me. What do you think that Philston is really up to? His real reason for being in Tokyo? It just might give me a starting place.” Silence. Behind them the door had stopped moving. Matu said: “It is only a wild guess, Nick. Crazy. You must understand that Laugh if you want to, but I think that Philston is in Tokyo to—”

The gun behind them coughed nastily in the silence. It was an old-fashioned broom-handle Luger with a relatively low muzzle velocity. The brutal 9mm slug tore away most of Kunizo Matu's face. His head jerked backward. His body, laden with fat did not move for a split instant. Then he fell forward, smashing the little table to splinters, spewing blood on the tatami, crushing the Buddha model.

By that time Nick Carter had hit the deck and was rolling to his right. He came up in a crouch with the Colt in his hand. He saw a vague figure, a blurred shadow, moving away from the door. Nick fired from his crouch. BLAM-BLAM-BLAM-BLAM The Colt roared like a cannon in the silence. The shadow vanished and Nick heard footsteps pounding down the hall. He went after the sound.

The shadow was just going out the door. BLAM-BLAM- The heavy .45 was waking the echoes. And the neighborhood. Carter knew that he had only minutes, perhaps only seconds, to get the hell out of there. He did not look back at his old friend. That was over now.

He ran out into the rain and the first false hint of dawn. There was light enough to see the assassin making a left turn down the way that he, and Nick, had come in. It was probably the only way in and out. Nick pelted after him. He did not fire again. It was pointless, and already he had the gut-churning feeling of failure. The bastard was going to get away.

When he got to the turn there was no one in sight. Nick ran down the narrow passage that led back to the flophouses, slipping and sliding in the filth underfoot. Voices were all around him now. Babies crying. Women questioning. Men moving and wondering.

At the stairs the old beggar still crouched beneath his rain mat. Nick touched his shoulder. "Papa-san! Did you see—"

The old man fell over like a broken doll. The ugly gash in his throat stared up at Nick like a silent and reproving mouth. The mat under him was drenched in red. In one gnarled hand he still clutched the crisp bill Nick had given him.

"Sorry, Papa-san." Nick vaulted up the steps. Despite the rain it was growing lighter by the minute. He had to get out of there, Now! No point at all in hanging around. The assassin had gotten clean away, lost in the maze of slums, and Kunizo Matu was dead, the cancer was cheated. Take it from there.

The police cars came into the street from opposite directions, two of them neatly blocking all escape. Two spotlights fixed him like a moth on cork.

"Tomarinasai!"

Nick stopped. There was a strong odor of frame-up and he was in the middle of it. Someone had been using a telephone and the timing was exquisite. He dropped the Colt and kicked it down the stairs.

There was a chance, if he could engage their attention, that they wouldn't see it. Or find the dead beggar. Think fast, Carter! He did think fast and went into his act. He put up his hands and walked slowly toward the nearest police car. He might get away with it. He had drunk just enough saki to have the smell on him.

He walked in between the two cars. They were halted now, engines purring softly, turret lights sparking around and around. Nick blinked in the glare of the headlights. He scowled, managed to lurch a little. He was Pete Fremont now and he had better not forget it. If they threw him in the sneezer he was finished. A caged hawk catches no rabbits.

"What in the hell is this all about? What goes on? People banging guns all over the place, cops stopping me! What the hell anyway?" Pete Fremont was mad and getting madder.

A cop got out of each car and walked into the path of fight. Both were small and neat. Both carried Nambu pistols, the big ones, and they were pointed at Nick. Pete.

The lieutenant looked at the big American and bowed slightly. A lieutenant! He made a note of that. Lieutenants didn't usually ride prowl cars.

"O namae wa?"

"Pete Fremont. Is it all right if I put my hands down now, officer?" Heavy on die sarcasm.

The other cop, a solidly built little man with buck teeth, gave Nick a quick frisk. He nodded to the lieutenant. Nick let his saki breath leak into the cop's face and saw him wince.

"Okay," said the lieutenant "Hands down. Koku-seki wa?"

Nick swayed a little. "America-jin." He said it proudly, triumphantly, as if he were just about to sing "The Star Spangled Banner."

He hiccoughed. "American-jin, by God, and don't you forget it If you monkeys think you're going to kick me around—"

The lieutenant looked bored. Drunken Yanks were no novelty to him. He held out his hand. "Papers, if you please."

Nick Carter handed over Pete Fremont's wallet and prayed a little.

The lieutenant was riffling through the wallet, holding it before one of the headlights. The other cop was standing back out of the light now, keeping his pistol on Nick. They knew their business, these Tokyo cops.

The lieutenant shot a glance at Nick. "Tokyo no jusho wa?"

Christ! His address in Tokyo? Pete Fremont's address in Tokyo. He didn't have a clue. All he could do was hope. His brain clicked like a computer and he came up with something that might work.

"I don't live in Tokyo," he said. "I'm in Japan on business. Just got

in last night. I live in Seoul. Korea.” Frantically he racked his brain for an address in Seoul. Had it! Sally Su’s house.

“Where in Seoul?” The lieutenant had come closer now, was looking him up and down more carefully, judging him by his clothes and his smell. His half smile was disdainful. Just who are you trying to kid, saki-head?

“19 Dongjadong, Choongkoo.” Nick leered and expelled saki breath at the lieutenant. “Check it out, Buster. You’ll find I’m telling the truth.” He let a whine creep into his voice “Say, what is this all about? I haven’t done anything. I just came out here to see a girl. Then when I was leaving all the shooting started. And now you guys —”

The lieutenant was regarding him with slight puzzlement. Nick took heart. The cop was going to buy the story. Thank God he had gotten rid of the Colt. But he could still be in trouble if they went snooping around.

“You have been drinking?” It was a rhetorical question.

Nick swayed and hiccoughed again. “Yeah. I been drinking a little. I always drink when I’m with my girl. What about it?”

“You heard shooting? Guns being fired? Where?”

Nick shrugged. “I don’t know exactly where. You can bet I didn’t go to investigate! All I know is that I was just leaving my girl’s house, minding my own business, and all of a sudden wham—wham?” He stopped and looked at the lieutenant suspiciously. “Hey! How come you people got here so fast? You were expecting trouble, eh?”

The lieutenant frowned. “I ask the questions, Mr. Fremont. But we did get a report of a disturbance around here. This neighborhood, you understand, is not of the best.” He looked Nick up and down again, taking in the bedraggled suit and the crummy hat and trenchcoat. His expression confirmed his opinion that Mr. Pete Fremont belonged in this neighborhood. The phone call, as a matter of fact, had been anonymous and skimpy. There would be trouble in the Sanya district, near the flophouses, in half an hour. Shooting trouble. The caller was a law-abiding Japanese and thought the police should know. That was all— that and the click of a softly replaced phone.

The lieutenant scratched his chin and glanced around him. The light was growing. The jumble of shacks and hovels stretched for a mile in every direction. It was a maze and he knew he would find nothing in it. He did not have enough men for a proper search, even had he known what he was looking for. And the police, when they ventured into the Sanya jungle at all, went in fours and fives. He looked at the big drunken American. Fremont? Pete Fremont? That name was vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place it. Did it matter? The Yank was obviously broke, on the beach, and there were a lot like him

in Tokyo and any large city in the Orient. He had been shacking up with some Sanya whore. So what? That was not against the law.

Nick waited patiently. This was a time to keep his mouth shut. He was following the lieutenant's thoughts. The officer was going to let him go.

The lieutenant was about to hand the wallet back to Nick when a radio crackled metallically in one of the cars. Someone called softly to the lieutenant. He turned away, still with the wallet in his hand. "A moment, please." Always polite, the Tokyo cops. Nick cursed under his breath. It was getting too damned light! They were going to spot that dead beggar and then the stuff would hit the fan for sure.

The lieutenant came back. Nick felt a little sick as he recognized the expression on the man's face. He had seen it before. Cat knows where there is a nice fat canary.

The lieutenant opened the wallet again. "You say your name is Pete Fremont?"

Nick looked puzzled. At the same time he moved a small step closer to the lieutenant. Something had gone wrong. Badly wrong. He began to make a new plan.

He pointed to the wallet and said indignantly: "Yeah. Pete Fremont. It's all in there, for Christ's sake. Say, what is this! The old third degree? It won't work. I know my rights. You either charge me or let me go. And if you charge me I'll get right on the horn to the American Ambassador and—"

The lieutenant smiled and pounced. "I'm sure the Ambassador will be glad to hear from you, sir. I think you will have to come to the station with us. There seems to be a most curious mix-up. A man has been found dead in his apartment. A man who is also named Pete Fremont and who has been positively identified as Pete Fremont by his girl friend."

Nick tried to bluster. He moved another few inches closer to the man.

"So what? I didn't say I was the only Pete Fremont in the world. It's just a mistake."

The little lieutenant did not bow this time. He inclined his head very politely and said, "I am sure it is. But you will accompany us to the station, please, until we have this matter arranged." He motioned to the other cop who was still covering Nick with the Nambu.

Nick Carter went to the lieutenant in a swift gliding movement. The cop, though surprised, was well trained and went into a defensive judo posture, lax and waiting for Nick to lunge at him. Kunizo Matu had taught Nick that one years before.

Nick stopped short. He offered his right arm as bait and when the cop tried to clamp his wrist for the shoulder throw Nick took the arm

away and jolted a vicious short left into the man's solar plexus. He had to get close, fast, before the other cops could start shooting.

Stunned, the lieutenant slumped forward, Nick caught him and moved behind him in a motion as fast as a heartbeat. He got a full nelson and lifted the man off the ground. He didn't weigh more than 120-130. With his legs spread wide so the man couldn't kick him in the groin Nick backed toward the steps leading to the passage behind the flophouses. It was the only way out now. The little cop dangled in front of him, an effective bullet shield.

Three cops were training guns on him now. The spotlights were feeble rays of dead light in the growing dawn.

Nick backed cautiously toward the steps. "Stay away," he warned them. "You rush me and I'll break his neck!"

The lieutenant tried to kick him and Nick put on a little pressure. The bones in the lieutenant's thin neck made a snapping sound. He groaned and stopped kicking.

"He's all right," Nick told them. "I haven't hurt him yet. Let's keep it that way."

Where in hell was that first step?

The three cops stopped following him. One of them ran back to a car and began talking rapidly into the radio mike. Calling for help. Nick didn't mind. He didn't plan to be around.

His foot touched the first step. Good. Now if he didn't make any mistakes he had a chance.

He scowled at the cops. They were keeping their distance.

"I'm taking him with me," Nick said. "Down this passage behind me. Try to follow and he's going to get hurt. Stay here like good little policemen and he will be okay. Up to you. Sayonara!"

He went backward down the steps. At the bottom he was just out of sight of the cops. He could feel the old beggar's body against his legs. He put on sudden pressure, bent the lieutenant's head forward and slammed him across the neck with a karate chop. His thumb was rigidly extended and he felt a little shock as the calloused flesh blade of his hand slammed into the scrawny neck. He dropped the man.

The Colt was lying partly under the dead beggar. Nick scooped it up—the butt was sticky with the old man's blood—and ran down the passage. He kept the Colt in his right hand, jutting out. No one in this neighborhood was going to interfere with a man carrying a cannon.

It was now a matter of seconds. He wasn't going out of the Sanya jungle, he was going in, and once in the cops would never find him. The shacks were all of paper or wood or tin, flimsy fire traps, and it was simply a matter of bulldozing his way.

He made the turn to his right again and ran toward Matu's house. He ran in the front door, still open, and on through the inner room.

Kunizo was lying there in his blood. Nick kept going.

He smashed through a paper door. A brown face peered in fright from a floor pad. The servant. Too scared to get up and investigate. Nick kept going.

He put his arms in front of his face and bulled through a wall. The paper and flimsy wood tore away with slight complaint Nick began to feel like a tank.

He crossed a little open court littered with junk. There was another wood and paper wall. He plunged into it, leaving the outline of his big body in gaping cut-out. The room was empty. He slammed ahead, through another wall, into another room—or was it another house—and a man and woman gaped in astonishment from a floor bed. A child lay between them.

Nick touched his hat with a finger. “Sorry.” He ran on.

He ran through six houses, kicked three dogs aside and surprised one couple in copulation before he came out in a narrow winding lane that led somewhere. That suited him. Somewhere away from the cops who were blundering and cursing along behind him. His trail was plain enough, but the cops were polite and dignified and had to do things the Japanese way. They would never catch him. Not in Sanya they wouldn’t!

An hour later he was over the Namidabashi Bridge and approaching Minowa station where he had left the Datsun parked. The station was crowded with early workers. There were many cars in the parking lot and queues already forming at the ticket windows.

Nick did not go directly into the station grounds. There was a small snack bar already open across the street and he had a koka-kora, wishing it was something much stronger. It had been a rugged night.

He could see the top of the Datsun. No one looked especially interested in it. He lingered over the Coke and let his eyes wander over the crowd, sifting and judging. No cops. He could have sworn to that

Not that it meant he was out of this yet. Home free. Cops, he acknowledged, were going to be the least of his worries. Cops were fairly predictable. Cops he could handle.

Someone knew he was in Tokyo. Someone had followed him to Kunizo’s place, in spite of all his precautions. Someone had killed Kunizo and set Nick up for it. That might have been accident, happenstance. They could have wanted to give the cops someone, anyone, to stop pursuit and questions. They might He didn’t really think so.

Or had someone followed him to Sanya? Had it been a setup from the very beginning? Or, if not a setup, how had someone known he would be in Kunizo’s house? Nick could think of an answer to that one

and he didn't like it It made him feel a little sick. He had come to like Tonaka.

He headed for the parking lot. He wasn't going to solve anything by beating his brains out over a suburban Coke bar. He had to go to work. Kunizo was dead and he was without contacts for the moment. Somewhere in the Tokyo haystack was a needle by the name of Richard Phdston and Nick had to find him. Fast.

He reached the Datsun and stared down. Passersby hissed in sympathy. Nick ignored them. All four of the tires had been slashed to ribbons.

A train came in. Nick started for the ticket window, reaching for his hip pocket. So he didn't have a carl He could take the train to Ueno Park and change to a train for downtown Tokyo. It was better, actually. A man in a car was confined, a good target, and easy to follow.

His hand came out of his pocket empty. He didn't have the wallet Pete Fremont's wallet The little cop had it.

Chapter 7

A trail like a bull moose on roller skates careering through a formal garden.

That, Hawk considered, was an apt description of the spoor left behind by Nick Carter. He was alone in his office, Aubrey and Terence having just departed, and after he finished going through a stack of yellow flimsies he spoke on the intercom to Delia Stokes.

"Cancel the red APB on Nick, Delia. Make it a yellow instead. All points to stand by, to offer any assistance if he asks for it, but not to interfere. He is not to be recognized, followed or reported on. Absolutely no interference unless he requests help. Got that?"

"Got it, sir."

"Right. Get it out at once."

Hawk clicked the intercom off and sat back, stripping a cigar without looking at it. He was playing a hunch. Nick Carter was onto something—God might know, for Hawk certainly didn't—and he had decided to stay out of it. Let Nick work it out his own way. If any man in the world could take care of himself it was Killmaster.

Hawk picked up one of the flimsies and studied it again. His thin mouth, which often reminded Nick of a wolf trap, quirked in a dry smile. Ames had done his job well. It was all here—as far as Tokyo International Airport.

Nick, accompanied by four Japanese Girl Scouts, had boarded a Northwest Airlines plane in Washington. He had been in a gay mood and had insisted on kissing a stewardess and shaking hands with the Captain. At no time had he been really obnoxious, or only slightly, and it was only when he insisted on dancing in the aisle that the co-captain had been summoned to quiet him down. Later he had ordered champagne for all aboard the plane. He had led the other passengers in song, proclaiming that he was a flower child and that love was his thing.

The Girl Scouts had managed to control him fairly well, actually, and the crew, questioned by Ames over long distance, admitted that the flight had been lively and different. Not that they would care to do it again.

They had, with absolutely no reluctance, poured Nick off at Tokyo International and watched the Girl Scouts whisk him into Customs. Beyond that they did not know.

Ames, still by phone, had established that Nick and the Girl Scouts had gotten into a taxi and vanished into the wild melee of Tokyo traffic. And that was that.

And yet it was not quite all. Hawk turned to another yellow flimsy containing his own notes.

Cecil Aubrey, a little reluctantly, had at last admitted that his tip on Richard Philston had come from one Kunizo Matu, a retired karate teacher now living in Tokyo. Aubrey did not know exactly where in Tokyo.

Matu had lived in London for many years and had worked for MI5.

"We always suspected him of being a double," Aubrey had said. "We thought he worked for Jap Intelligence, too, but we could never prove it. We didn't really care at the moment. Our, er, interests didn't clash and he did a good job for us."

Hawk had gotten out some old files and searched back. His memory was very nearly perfect, but he liked to confirm.

Nick Carter had known Kunizo Matu in London, in fact, used him on a couple of jobs. There was not much else to be gleaned from the barren reports. Nick Carter had a way of keeping personal business just that—personal.

And yet—Hawk sighed and pushed the stack of papers away. He stared at the Western Union clock. This was a devious profession and very seldom did the left hand know what the right was doing.

Ames had searched the apartment and found Nick's Luger and stiletto in the mattress. That was odd, Hawk conceded. He must feel naked without them.

But Girl Scouts! How in hell had they gotten into the act? Hawk began to laugh, a thing he very rarely did. Gradually he lost control and sat helplessly in the chair, eyes tearing, and laughed until his chest muscles began to pain.

Delia Stokes did not believe it at first. She peered through the door. Sure enough. The old man was sitting there and laughing like a loon.

Chapter 8

There is a first time for everything. This was the first time Nick had ever panhandled. He selected his victim well, a middle-aged, well-dressed man carrying an expensive-looking briefcase. He bummed fifty yen off the man, who looked Nick up and down, wrinkled his nose and dug into his pocket. As he handed the note to the AXEmen, he bowed slightly and tipped his black Homburg.

Nick bowed in return. "Arigato, kandai na-sen."

"Yoroshii desu." The man turned away.

Nick got off at Tokyo Station and walked west toward the Palace grounds. The incredible Tokyo traffic, was already budding into a writhing mass of taxis, trucks, clanging trams and private cars. A crash-helmeted motorcyclist slammed past with a girl clinging to the pillion. Kaminariyoku. Thunder breed.

What now, Carter? No papers and no money. Wanted for questioning by the police. It was time to go to ground for a while—if he had any place to go. He doubted that it would do him much good to go back to the Electric Palace. Anyway it wouldn't be open this early.

He sensed the taxi gliding to a halt beside him and his hand snaked inside the trenchcoat to the Colt in his waistband.

"Sssttttt—Carter-san! In here!"

It was Kato, one of the three weird sisters. Nick took a fast look around. It was a perfectly ordinary taxi and there didn't seem to be any followers. He got in. Maybe he could borrow a few yen.

Kato huddled in her corner. She gave him a perfunctory smile and rapped a command to the driver. The taxi took off in the usual manner of Tokyo taxis, with tires screaming and the driver daring anything to get in the way.

"Surprise," said Nick. "I didn't expect to see you again, Kato. You are Kato?"

She nodded. "I am honored to see you again, Carter-san. But it is not of my seeking. There is much trouble. Tonaka is missing."

A nasty worm turned in his belly. He waited.

"She did not answer her phone. Sato and I went to her apartment and there had been a fight—everything is torn to pieces. And she is gone."

Nick nodded toward the driver.

"He is okay. One of us."

"What do you think happened to Tonaka?"

Her shrug was forlorn. "Who can say? But I am afraid—we all are."

Tonaka was our leader. It is possible that Johnny Chow has her. If so he will torture her and make her lead them to her father. Kunizo Matu. The Chicoms wish to kill him because he fights back against them.”

He did not tell her. But he began to understand why Matu was dead and how he had been so nearly trapped.

Nick patted her arm. “I will do what I can. But I need money and a place to hide for a few hours until I can make a plan. You can arrange this?”

“Yes. We go there now. To a geisha house in Shimbasi. Mato and Sato will also be there. As soon as they do not find you.”

He pondered that. She saw his confusion and simled faintly. “We have all been looking for you. Sato, Mato and myself. All in separate taxis. We go to all stations and look. Tonaka did not tell us much—just that you have gone to see her father. It is better, you see, that each of us does not know too much about what others do. But when Tonaka is missing we know we must find you for help. So we get taxis and start looking. It is all we know to do—and it worked. I find you.”

Nick had been studying her as she spoke. This was not the Girl Scout of Washington and the plane. Geisha! He should have guessed.

At the moment there was nothing geisha about her but the elaborate hairdo. She had, he imagined, been working that night and early morning. Geishas kept weird hours, dictated by the whims of their various protectors. Now her face was still shiny with the cold cream she had used to remove the chalky makeup. She wore a tan pullover sweater, a miniskirt and a tiny pair of black Korean boots.

Nick wondered just how safe a geisha house would be. Yet it was all he had. He fit his last cigarette and began asking questions. He did not intend to tell her any more than he must. It was best, as she herself had mentioned.

“About this Pete Fremont, Kato. Tonaka told me that you stole his clothes? These clothes?”

“That is true. It was a small thing.” She was obviously puzzled.

“Where was Fremont when you did this?”

“In bed. Sleeping. We thought so.”

“Thought so? Was he or wasn’t he?” Something pretty fishy here.

Kato regarded him solemnly. She had a smear of lipstick on one shiny front tooth.

“I say thought so. We take his clothes. Easy, because his girl not there then. Later we find out that Pete is dead. He die in sleep.”

Christ! Nick counted slowly to five.

“Then what did you do?”

She shrugged again. “What can do? We need the clothes for you. We take. We know that Pete die of wisuki, he drink, drink all the time,

and that nobody kill him. We leave. Then later we go back and take body away and hide it so police not find out”

Very softly he said, “They did find out Kato.” Rapidly he explained his encounter with the police, leaving out the fact that Kunizo Matu was also dead.

Kato did not seem very impressed. “Yes. I am sorry. But I know what happen, I think. We leave to take clothes to Tonaka. His girl come. She find Pete dead from alcohol and call police. They come. All then leave. We come back, not knowing police and girl have been there, and we take body and hide it. Okay?”

Nick sat back. “I suppose okay,” he said weakly. It would have to do. It was wacky but at least it explained matters. And it just might help him—the Tokyo cops had lost a body and they might be a little embarrassed. They might decide to play it down, keep it quiet for a time, at least until they found the body or gave up on it. That meant that his description wouldn’t be in the newspapers or on radio and television. Not yet. So his cover as Pete Fremont was still good—up to a point. With the wallet it would have been better, but that was gone forever.

They passed the Shiba Park Hotel and turned right toward the Hikawa Shrine. It was a district of apartment houses, with here and there a villa set back in its formal garden. It was one of the top geisha districts, where the ethics were rigid and the behavior discreet. Gone were the days when the girls had to live in a mizu shobai atmosphere, beyond the pale. Comparisons were always invidious—in this case especially so—but Nick had always thought of geishas as on a par with the very highest class of New York call girl. With the geishas far superior in brains and talent

The taxi tinned into a driveway that led back through gardens and past a pool and miniature bridge. Nick tugged the smelly trenchcoat closer about him. A bum like him was going to stand out a htd in a high class geisha house.

Kato patted his knee. “We will go to a private place. Mato and Sato will come soon and we can talk. Make plans. We must for if you do not help now, cannot help, it will be very bad for all Eta girls.”

The taxi rolled to a stop under a porte-cochere. The house was big and blocky, Western style, of stone and brick. Kato paid the driver and hustled Nick inside and upstairs to a quiet sitting room furnished in modern Swedish.

Kato perched herself on a chair, tugged down her miniskirt and looked at Nick. At the moment he was helping himself to a modest drink from a small bar in one corner.

“You want take a bath, Carter-san?”

Nick held up the Scotch and peered through the amber. Lovely

color. "A bassu would be number one. Have I got time?" He found a carton of American cigarettes and broke it open. Life was looking up.

Kato glanced at a watch on her slim wrist "I think so. Plenty time. Mato and Sato say, if they not find you, they go to Electric Palace and see if any message."

"Message from who?"

The slim shoulders moved beneath the sweater. "Who knows? Maybe you. Maybe even Tonaka. If Johnny Chow has her maybe he let us know, so to frighten us."

"Maybe so."

He sipped at his Scotch and watched her. She was nervous. Very nervous. She was wearing a single strand of small pearls and she kept gnawing at them, getting lipstick on them. She kept fidgeting in the chair, crossing and recrossing her legs, and he saw a flash of brief white pants.

"Carter-san?"

"Yeah?"

She chewed the nail of her little finger. "I like to ask you something. You not get angry?"

Nick grinned. "Probably not. I can't promise that, Kato. What is it?"

Hesitation. Then: "You like me, Carter-san? You think I am pretty?"

He did. She was. Very pretty. Like a sweet little lemon-colored doll. He told her so.

Kato looked at her watch again. "I am most bold, Carter-san. But I do not care. I am liking you now for a long time—ever since we try to sell you cookies. Most liking you. We have time now, no men come until evening, and Mato and Sato not yet I would like to take a bath with you and then make love. You do?"

He was genuinely touched. And he knew he was being honored. In the first instant he did not want her and then, in the next instant, he knew that he did. Why not? It was, after all, what it was all about Love—and death.

She misunderstood his hesitation. She came to him and brushed her fingers over his face lightly. Her eyes were long and darkest brown and full of amber sparks.

"You understand," she said softly, "that it is not a business thing. I am not being geisha now. I give. You take. You will do?"

He understood that her need was great. She was frightened and, for the moment, alone. She needed comfort and this was what she understood.

He kissed her. "I'll take," he said. "But first I will take bassu."

She led him to a bathroom. A moment later she joined him in the

shower and they soaped and scrubbed each other in all the fine and private places. She had a lily smell and her breasts were those of a pubescent girl.

She took him into an adjacent bedroom with a real United States bed. She made him stretch out supine. She kissed him and whispered, "You be still, Carter-san. I do everything at first."

"Not quite everything," said Nick Carter.

They were sitting quietly in the outer room, smoking and regarding each other with satisfied affection when the door burst open and Mato and Sato came in. They had been running. Sato was crying. Mato was carrying a parcel wrapped in brown paper. She extended it to Nick.

"This come to Electric Palace. For you. With a note. We have—have read the note. I—I—" She turned away and burst into tears, gasping, the makeup running down her smooth cheeks.

Nick put the parcel on a chair and took a note from the unsealed envelope.

Pete Fremont—we have Tonaka. Proof is in the box. If you do not want her to lose the other one come at once to Electric Palace club. Wait outside on curb. Wear the trenchcoat.

There was no signature, just the round stencil of a wooden chop done in red ink. Nick showed it to Kato.

"Johnny Chow."

He ripped the twine from the parcel with nimble big fingers. The three girls hovered, silent now, stunned, awaiting the new horror. Sato had stopped crying and had her fingers jammed into her mouth.

Killmaster had a hunch that it was going to be pretty bad. It was worse than that

Inside the little box, nestling on a pad of cotton, was a bloody slice of rounded flesh with the nipple and aura intact. The knife had been very sharp and the user most skillful.

A female breast

Chapter 9

Killmaster had rarely been in a colder, more murderous rage. He gave the girls curt orders in a voice like ice, then left the geisha house and walked over to Shimbasidori. His fingers caressed the cold butt of the Colt. At the moment he would have emptied the clip into Johnny Chow's gut with all the pleasure in the world. If indeed it was Tonaka's breast that had been sent him—the three girls were convinced of it, because that was the way Johnny Chow played—then Nick meant to exact an equal amount of flesh from the bastard. His stomach churned at what he had just seen. This Johnny Chow must be a sadist to end all sadists—even for a Chicom.

There was no taxi in sight so he kept walking, eating up the distance with angry strides. There was no question of not going. There might still be a chance to save Tonaka. Wounds did heal, even the most drastic, and there were such things as artificial breasts. Not a very appealing solution, but it was better than death. He thought that to a young and lovely girl anything, very nearly anything, would be better than death.

Still no taxi. He wheeled left and started walking toward the Ginza-dori. From where he was now it was about a mile and a half to the Electric Palace club. Kato had given him the exact address. As he walked he began to sort it out in his mind. The cool, experienced, crafty and calculating mind of a top professional agent.

It was Pete Fremont who had been summoned and not Nick Carter. That meant that Tonaka, even in the agony of torture, had managed to cover for him. She had had to give them something, a name, and so she had given them Pete Fremont. Yet she had known that Fremont was dead of alcoholism. All three girls, Kato, Mato and Sato, swore to that Tonaka had known that Fremont was dead when she gave him the man's clothes.

Johnny Chow did not know that Fremont was dead! Obviously. Which meant that he did not know Pete Fremont, or knew him only slightly perhaps by reputation. Whether or not he knew Fremont by sight would soon be revealed—when they met face to face. Nick touched the Colt in his belt again. He was looking forward to that.

No taxi yet. He paused to light a cigarette. Traffic was heavy now. A police car cruised past without paying him the slightest attention. Not surprising. Tokyo was the second largest city in the world and if the cops were sitting on the Fremont thing until they could find the body again, it was going to take them a little time to get organized.

Where were all the goddamned taxis? It was as bad as New York

on a rainy night

Far down the Ginza, still a mile away, loomed the glittering silo structure of the San-ai Department Store. Nick shifted the Colt to an easier position and began walking again. He did not check his backtrail because now he did not give much of a damn. Johnny Chow must be pretty sure that he would come.

He remembered Tonaka saying that Pete Fremont had helped the Eta girls occasionally, when he was sober enough. The chances were that Johnny Chow knew that, even if he did not know Fremont personally. Chow must want to make some sort of a deal. Pete Fremont, though a bum and an alcoholic, was still a newspaper man of sorts and might still have connections.

Or Johnny Chow might just want to get his hands on Fremont—give him the same treatment that he had given Kunizo Matu. It might be as simple as that. Fremont was an enemy, he helped the Eta, and Johnny Chow was using the girl as bait so he could get rid of Fremont.

Nick shrugged his big shoulders and kept walking. One thing he did know—Tonaka had covered for him. His identity as Nick Carter, AXEmen, was still safe. A dead man was fronting for him.

He did not notice the black Mercedes until it was much too late. It swooped out of a swirl of traffic and edged to the curb beside him. Two neatly dressed Japanese leaped out and began to walk alongside Nick, one on either side. The Mercedes crawled after them.

For an instant Nick considered the possibility that they were detectives. He discarded that idea at once. Both men were wearing light topcoats and kept their right hands in the pockets. The taller of them, wearing thick glasses, nudged Carter with the gun in his pocket. He smiled.

“Anata no onamae wa?”

Cool hands. He knew they were not cops now. He was being offered a ride, true Chicago style. He carefully kept his hands away from his belt.

“Fremont. Pete Fremont. What’s it to you?”

The men exchanged glances. The one with the glasses nodded and said, “Thanking you. We wished to be sure of the right man. You will get into the car, please.”

Nick scowled. “What if I don’t?”

The other man, short and muscular, did not smile. He poked Nick with the concealed gun. “Would be most regrettable. We kill you.”

The street was thronged. People pushed and bustled around them. Nobody was paying them the slightest attention. It was how a lot of professional murders were committed. They would shoot him and drive off in the Mercedes and no one would see anything.

The short man shoved him toward the curb. “In the car. You come

quietly and you will not be harmed. You not come we kill. So?"

Nick shrugged. "So I come quietly." He got in the car, alert to catch them in an unguarded moment, but the chance did not come. The short one followed him in, not too closely. The tall one went around and got in from the other side. They sandwiched him and the pistols came into view. Nambus. He was seeing a lot of Nambus these days.

The Mercedes pulled away from the curb and slipped deftly into traffic again. The driver was wearing chauffeur's livery and a dark, peaked cap. He drove like he knew his business.

Nick forced himself to relax. His chance would come. "Why all the rush? I was on my way to the Electric Palace. What's Johnny Chow so impatient about?"

The tall man was frisking Nick. At the name Chow he hissed and stared at his companion, who shrugged.

"Shizuki ni!"

Nick shut up. So they weren't from Johnny Chow. Who the hell then?

The man who was frisking him found the Colt and pulled it out of his belt. He showed it to his companion, who stared at Nick coldly. The man tucked the Colt away under his topcoat

Under his calm Nick Carter was raging and anxious. He didn't know who they were or where they were taking him or why. It was a development out of the blue, impossible to foresee. But when he didn't show up at the Electric Palace, Johnny Chow was going back to work on Tonaka. Frustration clawed at him. For the moment he was as helpless as a babe. There was not a goddamned thing he could do.

They drove a long time. They made no attempt to conceal their destination, whatever it was. The driver never spoke. The two men kept Nick under close watch, the pistols barely concealed by their topcoats.

The Mercedes ran out past the Tokyo Tower, slanted east on Sakurada briefly, then made a sharp right turn into Meiji dori. The rain had stopped now and a weak sun was trying to peer through low hanging gray clouds. They made good time even in the cluttered, boisterous traffic. The driver was a genius.

They skirted Arisugawa Park and in a few moments Nick spotted Shibuya Station off to the left. Just ahead now lay Olympic Village, with the National Stadium a little to the northeast

Beyond Shinjuku Garden they made a sharp left past the Meiji Shrine. They were getting into the suburbs now and the country was opening up. Narrow lanes led off in various directions and Nick caught an occasional glimpse of big houses sitting well back from the road behind neatly barbered hedges and trim small orchards of plum

and cherry.

They left the arterial road and slanted left into a blacktopped lane. After a mile they took another, narrower lane that ended in a tall iron gate flanked by stone pillars covered with lichen. A plaque on one of the pillars said: Msumpto. It meant nothing to the AXEman.

The short man got out and pressed a button set into one of the pillars. After a moment the gate swung open. They drove through and up a winding macadamized road bordered by parkland. Nick saw a flutter of movement to his left and watched a small herd of tiny white-tailed deer romp through squat umbrella-shaped trees. They rounded a line of peony trees, not yet blooming, and the house came in view. It was huge and it spoke quietly of money. Old money.

The drive curled into a crescent before broad stairs that led up to a terrace. Fountains played to right and left, and off to one side was a large swimming pool not yet filled for the summer.

Nick looked at the tall man. "Mitsubishi-san is expecting me?"

The man prodded him with his gun. "Out No talk."

The shorter man thought it was reasonably funny. He looked at Nick and chuckled. "Mitsubishi-san? Ha-hah."

The central block of the house was enormous, built of dressed stone in which mica and veins of quartz still sparkled. Two lower wings angled back from the main block, paralleled by the balustrade of the terrace which was dotted here and there by vast urns in the form of amphorae.

They ushered Nick through arched doors into a vast tessellated foyer. The short man rapped on a door opening off to the right. From within a British voice, high with the nasality of the upper classes, said: "Come."

The tall man put his Nambu in the small of Nick's back and prodded. Nick went. He was eager now. Philston. Richard Philston! It had to be.

They halted just inside the door. The room was cavernous, some sort of a library-study with half-paneled walls and a grained shadowy ceiling. Battalions of books marched up the walls. Far back in a corner a single light glowed on a desk. Out of the light, in shadow, sat a man.

The man said: "You may go, you two. Wait just outside the door. Would you care for a drink, Mr. Fremont?"

The two Japanese gunmen left. The big door clicked oily behind them. There was an old-fashioned tea cart near the desk, laden with bottles and siphons and a large thermos. Nick stalked toward it. Play it to the hilt, he told himself. Think Pete Fremont. Be Pete Fremont.

As he reached for the Scotch bottle he said, "Who are you? And what the hell do you mean having me snatched off the street like that! Don't you know I could sue hell out of you?"

The man behind the desk chuckled throatily. "Sue me, Mr. Fremont? Really! You Americans have a bizarre sense of humor. I learned that in Washington many years ago. One drink, Mr. Fremont! One. We are going to be perfectly candid and, you see. I know your failing. I am going to offer you a chance to make a great deal of money—but to earn it you must remain absolutely sober."

Pete Fremont—it was Nick Carter who was dead now, and Fremont who lived—Pete Fremont dropped ice in a tall glass and tipped the Scotch bottle, poured heavily, defiantly. He swizzled it, then walked to a leather armchair near the desk and sat down. He unbuttoned the filthy trenchcoat—he wanted Philston to see the bedraggled suit—and kept the ancient hat on.

"All right," he growled. "So you know I'm an alcoholic. So? Who are you and what do you want with me?" He drank. "And take that damned light out of my eyes. That's an old trick."

The man tilted the lamp away. There was half shadow between them now.

"My name is Richard Philston," said the man. "You may have heard of me?"

Fremont nodded curdy. "I've heard of you."

"Yes," the man said smoothly. "I suppose I am rather, er, infamous."

Pete nodded again. "It's your word, not mine."

"Exactly. But now to business, Mr. Fremont In perfect candor, as I said. We both know what we are and I see no reason to fence or to spare each other's feelings. You agree?"

Pete scowled. "I agree. So stop the damned fencing and get to the point How much money? And what do I have to do to earn it?"

With the bright light shunted away he began to see the man behind the desk. The suit was a light pepper and salt tweed of impeccable cut a little worn now. No Moscow tailor would ever duplicate it.

"I am talking about fifty thousand American dollars," said the man. "Half of it now—if you agree to my terms."

"Keep talking," said Pete. "I like the sounds you're making."

The shirt was lightly blue striped with a tab collar. The tie was knotted small. Royal Marines. The man who was playing Pete Fremont ran the files through his mind: Philston was no social poacher. He had once held a commission in the Royal Marines. That had been just after he had come down from Cam-bridge.

The man behind the desk took a cigarette from an exquisite cloisonne box. Pete refused and fumbled for his crumpled pack of Pall Mall. Smoke spiraled upward toward the grained and coffered ceiling.

"First things first," said the man. "Do you remember a man named

Paul Jacobi?"

"Yes." And he did. Nick Carter did. Sometimes the hours, days, of toiling through photographs and files paid off. Paul Jacobi. A Dutch Commie. Minor agent. Known to have worked in Malaya and Indonesia for a time. Dropped out of sight. Last reported in Japan.

Pete Fremont waited for the man to do the leading. How did Jacobi fit into it?

Philston opened a drawer. There was a rustle of paper. "Three years ago Paul Jacobi tried to recruit you. He offered you a job, working for us. You refused. Why was that?"

Pete scowled and drank. "I wasn't ready to sell out then."

"Yet you never informed on Jacobi, never told anyone he was a Russian agent Why?"

"None of my damned concern. Maybe I didn't want to play with Jacobi but that didn't mean I had to blow the whistle on him. All I wanted, all I want now, is to be left alone to drink myself to death." He laughed harshly. "It's not as easy as you might think."

Silence. He could see Philston's face now. A soft handsomeness blurred by sixty years of indulgence. A hint of jowl, the nose blunt, the eyes wide set and void of color in the semi-gloom. The mouth was the betrayer—loose, a trifle moist, a whisper of effeminacy. The flaccid mouth of the too tolerant bisexual. The files clicked over in the AXEmen's brain. Philston was a lady killer. Man killer, too, in more ways than one.

Philston said: "You have not seen Paul Jacobi lately?"

"No."

A hint of smile. "That is understandable. He is no longer with us. There was an accident in Moscow. Too bad."

Pete Fremont drank. "Yeah. Too bad. Let's forget Jacobi. What do you want me to do for the fifty thousand?"

Richard Phdston was setting his own pace. He crushed out his cigarette and reached for another one. "You would not work for us at the time you turned Jacobi down. Now you will work for me, so you say. May I ask why this change of heart? I represent the same, er, clients that Jacobi did. As you must know."

Philston leaned forward and Pete got a good look at his eyes. Pale, washed-out gray. Brushed in with limpid water color.

Pete Fremont said: "Look, Philston! I don't give a damn who wins. Not a single damn! And things have changed since I knew Jacobi. A lot of whisky has gone under the bridge. I'm older. I'm broker. Right now I've got about two hundred ye1n to my name. That answer your question?"

"HMMMM—to a degree, yes. All right." Paper rustled again. "You were a newspaperman in the States?"

It was a chance for a little bravura acting and Nick Carter let Pete leap at it. He exploded in a nasty little laugh. He let his hands tremble a bit and he looked with longing at the Scotch bottle.

“Good Christ, man! You want references? All right I can give you names but I doubt that you’ll hear anything good.”

Philston did not smile. “Yes. That I understand.” He consulted the paper. “You worked for the Chicago Tribune at one time. Also the New York Mirror and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, among others. You also worked for the Associated Press and the Hearst International Service. You were fired from all these positions for drinking?”

Pete laughed. He tried to touch up the sound with just a hint of mild insanity. “You missed a few. The Indianapolis News and a few country papers.” He remembered Tonaka’s words and went on, “There is also the Hong Kong Times and the Singapore Times. Here in Japan there’s Asahi and Osaka and a few others. You name the paper, Philston, and I’ve probably been fired from it.”

“Hmmm. Just so. But you still have connections, friends, among newspaper men?”

Where was the bastard heading? Still no light at the end of the tunnel.

“I wouldn’t call them friends,” Pete said. “Acquaintances, maybe. An alcoholic hasn’t got any friends. But I know a few guys I can still borrow a buck from when I’m desperate enough.”

“And you could still plant a story? A big story? Let us suppose that you were given the story of the century, a really tremendous scoop as I believe you chaps call it, and it was exclusive with you. Only you! You could arrange that such a story would get immediate and full worldwide coverage?”

They were beginning to get to it.

Pete Fremont pushed back the battered hat and stared at Philston “I could do that, yes. But it would have to be authentic. Fully confirmed. You offering me such a story?”

“I may,” said Philston. “I just may. And if I do, Fremont, it will be fully confirmed. No worry about that!” The high, fluting, Establishment laugh was at some private joke. Pete waited.

Silence. Philston moved in his swivel chair and stared at the ceding. He stroked a well-manicured hand through silver gray hair. This was the crux. The sonofabitch was about to make up his mind.

While he waited the AXEmen pondered the vagaries, the breaks, the chancy bits of his profession. Timing, for instance. Those girls snatching the real Pete Fremont’s body and hiding it in the few moments that the cops and Pete’s girl friend were off stage. A one in a million chance, that. And now the fact of Fremont’s death hung over his own head like a sword. The minute that Philston, or Johnny Chow,

found out the truth the fake Pete Fremont was in the soup. Johnny Chow? He began to think along a new line. Maybe it was a way out for Tonaka—

Decision. Richard Philston opened another drawer. He came around the desk. In his hands was a thick packet of green bills. He tossed the money into Pete's lap. There was contempt in the gesture which Philston did not bother to conceal. He stood nearby, teetering slightly on his heels. Beneath the tweed jacket he wore a thin tan sweater that did not conceal a small paunch.

"I've decided to trust you, Fremont. I've no choice, really, but perhaps it isn't such a risk after all. It has been my experience that every man looks out for himself first. We are all selfish. Fifty thousand dollars will take you a long way from Japan. It means a new start, my friend, a new life. You've reached rock bottom—we both know that—and I can't think that you'll refuse this chance to get out of the gutter. I am a rational man, a logical man, and I think that you are too. This is absolutely your last chance. I think you realize that. So I'm gambling, you might say. Gambling that you will do the job efficiently and that you will stay sober until it is done."

The big man in the chair kept his eyes hooded. He riffled the crisp notes through his fingers and registered greed. He nodded. "For this land of money I can stay sober. You can believe it, Philston. For this land of dough you can even trust me."

Philston paced a few steps. There was something dainty, mincing, about his walk. The AXEmen wondered if the guy really was queer. There was no proof in his files. Only hints.

"It is not," said Philston, "altogether a matter of trust. As I am sure you understand. For one thing, if you do not carry out the assignment to my complete satisfaction you will not be paid the remainder of the fifty thousand. There will be a time lapse, naturally. If everything works out—then you will be paid."

Pete Fremont scowled. "Looks like I'm the one that has to trust you."

"To a point, yes. I might also point out something else—if you betray me or in any way attempt to double-cross, you will most certainly be killed. I am much esteemed by KGB. You will have heard of their long arm?"

"I know." Sulkily. "If I don't come through they'll murder me."

Philston regarded him with his washed-out gray eyes. "Yes. Sooner or later they will murder you."

Pete stretched for the Scotch bottle. "Okay—okay! Can I have one more drink?"

"No. You are in my employ now. No. more drinking until the job is completed."

The big man sank back into the chair. "Right. I was forgetting. You just bought me."

Philston went back behind the desk and sat down. "You are regretting your bargain already?"

"No. I told you, damn it, that I don't care who wins. I've got no country any more. No allegiance. I've just got me! Now suppose we cut the horsing around and you tell me what I have to do."

"I told you. I want you to plant a story in the press of the world. An exclusive story. The biggest story you or any other newspaperman ever had."

"World War three?"

Philston did not smile. He reached for a fresh cigarette from the cloisonne box. "Possibly. I do not think so. I—"

Pete Fremont waited, frowning. The bastard was having a little trouble screwing himself up to the point of saying it. Still dabbling a toe in the cold water. Hesitant to commit himself beyond the point of no return.

"There are many details to be worked out," he said. "A lot of background that you must understand. I—"

Fremont stood up and snarled, the irascible rage of a man who was dying for a drink. He slapped the packet of money against his palm. "I want this money damn it. I'll earn it. But not even for this much dough will I go into anything blind. What is it?"

"The Emperor of Japan is going to be assassinated. Your job is to see that the Chinese are blamed for it."

Chapter 10

Killmaster was not particularly surprised. Pete Fremont was, and had to show it. Had to show surprise and dismay and disbelief. He paused in the act of conveying a cigarette to his mouth and let his jaw droop.

“Jesus Christ! You must be out of your mind.”

Richard Philston, now that he had finally said it, was enjoying the consternation he had caused.

“Not at all Quite the contrary. Our plan, a plan we have been working on for months, is the essence of logic and sanity. The Chinese are our enemies. Sooner or later, unless they are forestalled, they will make war on Russia. The West will enjoy that. They will sit by and profit by it Only it is not going to happen that way. That is why I am in Japan, at great personal risk to myself.”

Fragments of Philston’s file glittered in the AXE-man’s mind like a montage. An assassination specialist!

Pete Fremont contrived an expression of awe mingled with lingering doubt. “I think you really mean it by God. And you’re going to kill him!”

“That is none of your affair. You will not be present and none of the responsibility, or blame, will be on your head.”

Pete laughed sourly. “Come on, Philston! I am mixed up in it, as of now. If I get caught I won’t have any head. They’ll slice it off like a cabbage. Let’s not kid around. I want that money, sure, but even a drunk like me wants to keep his head.”

“I assure you,” said Philston stiffly, “that you will not be implicated. Or need not be if you use your head to keep it on your shoulders. After all, I expect you to exercise some ingenuity for fifty thousand dollars.”

Nick Carter let Pete Fremont sit sullen and unconvinced while he let his own mind range free and fast. For the first time he became aware of the ticking of a tall clock in a corner of the room. The phone on Philston’s desk loomed twice its normal size. He hated them both. Time and modern communications were working inexorably against him. Let Philston find out that the real Fremont was dead and he, Nick Carter, was just as dead. Never doubt it. Those two goons outside the door were killers. Philston undoubtedly had a gun in his desk. A light sweat broke out on his forehead and he fished out a grubby handkerchief. This could easily get out of hand. He had to put the spins to Philston, put on the pressure for his own plan and get the hell out of here. But not too fast. It would not do to show too much

anxiety.

"You realize," Philston said silkily, "that you cannot back out now. You know too much. Any hesitation on your part simply means that I must have you killed."

"I'm not backing out, damn it. I'm trying to get used to the idea. Jesus! Kill the Emperor. Rig it so the Chinese get the blame. It isn't exactly a game of squat tag, you know. And you can run afterward. I can't. I have to stay and sweat it out. I can't plant a big he like that if I'm on the lam to Lower Slobbovia."

"Slobbovia? I don't think I quite—"

"Skip it. Give me a chance to figure it out. Just when is this killing going to come off?"

"Tomorrow night. There will be riots and mass sabotage. A great deal of sabotage. Tokyo will be blacked out also many other large cities. This is cover, you understand. The Emperor is in residence at the Palace now. That is my responsibility."

Pete nodded slowly. "I begin to get it You're working with the Chicoms—up to a point. For the sabotage bit. But they don't know anything about the assassination. Right?"

"Hardly," said Philston. "It wouldn't be much of a coup if they did. I explained that—Moscow and Peking are at war. This is an act of war. Pure logic. We intend to cause so much trouble for the Chinese that they will not be able to trouble us for years."

It was very nearly time now. Time to bring the pressure to bear. Time to get out of there and get to Johnny Chow. Philston's reaction was going to be important Maybe life or death important Not yet Not quite yet

Pete lit another cigarette. "I'll have to set this thing up," he told the man behind the desk. "You understand that? I mean I can't just rush in cold afterward and yell that I've got the scoop. They wouldn't listen to me. My reputation isn't so good, as you know. Which brings up another point—how am I going to prove this story? Confirm and document it? I hope you've thought of that"

"My dear chap! We are not amateurs. Day after tomorrow, as early as possible, you will go to the Ginza branch of the Chase Manhattan. You will have a key to a safe deposit box. In it you will find all the documentation you will need. Plans, orders, signatures, vouchers of payment, everything. These will back up your story. It is these papers that you will show your friends on the wire services and the newspapers. They are, I assure you, absolutely perfect forgeries. No one will doubt your story after reading them."

Philston chuckled. "It is even possible that some Chinese, those opposed to Mao, will believe it."

Pete fidgeted in the chair. "That's another thing— I'll have the

Chicoms after my skin. They'll know I'm lying. They'll try to kill me."

"Yes," agreed Philston. "I imagine they will. I am afraid I must let you worry about that. But you have survived this long, against all odds, and now you have twenty-five thousand dollars in cash. I think you will make out."

"When, and how, do I get the other twenty-five thousand if I bring it off?"

"It will be deposited in a Hong Kong account— when we are satisfied with your work. I am sure it will prove an incentive to you."

The phone on Philston's desk rang. The AXEman slid his hand into the trenchcoat, forgetting for the moment that the Colt was gone. He cursed under his breath. He had nothing. Nothing but his muscles and his brain.

Philston was speaking into the instrument. "Yes— yes. I have him. He is here now. I was, in fact, just going to call you."

The big man listened, staring down at his shabby rundown shoes. Call who? Was it just possible that—

Philston's voice turned snappish. He was frowning. "Look, J, I am giving the orders! And you're disobeying them at this moment by calling me. Don't do it again. No, I had no idea that the matter was so important, so urgent to you. In any case I have finished with him and will send him along. The usual place. Very well. What? Yes, I have given him his full instructions and, what is more to the point, I have paid him."

There was an angry metallic gabble in the phone. Philston scowled down at it.

"That will be all, J! You know your job—he is to be kept under constant surveillance until this thing is accomplished. I hold you responsible. Yes, everything is proceeding on schedule and as planned. Hang up now. No. I will not be in contact again until this thing is over. You do your job and I will do mine." Philston put the phone down with a bang.

Pete Fremont lit a cigarette and waited. J? Johnny? Johnny Chow? He began to hope. If it worked out that way he wouldn't have to use his own half complete plan. He watched Philston warily. If the Fremont cover was blown things were going to get hot. If he had to go he wanted to take Philston with him.

Richard Philston looked at him. "Fremont?"

The AXEman breathed again. "Yeah?"

"Do you know, or have you heard, of a man called Johnny Chow?"

Pete nodded. "I've heard of him. Never met him. The word is that he's honcho for the local Chicoms. I don't know how true it is."

Philston came around the desk. Not too close to the big man. He scratched his chin with a plump forefinger.

“Listen well, Fremont. From now on you’ll be walking the razor’s edge. That was Chow on the phone just now. He wants you. The reason he wants you is that he, and I, decided some time ago to use you as a newspaperman to plant a story.”

Pete watched him narrowly. It was beginning to jell.

He nodded. “Sure. But not the story? This Johnny Chow wants me to plant another story?”

“Precisely. Chow wants you to plant a story blaming the Eta for everything that is going to happen. I agreed to that, naturally. You will have to take it from there and play it that way.”

“I see. That’s why I was snatched off the street— you had to talk to me first.”

“Right again. No real difficulty there—I can cover that by saying, as I have said, that I personally wanted to give you instructions. Chow will not know what instructions, naturally. He should not be suspicious, or no more than usual. We don’t really trust each other and we each have our separate organizations. By tinning you over to him I will appease him a bit. I had intended to do so in any case. I have few men and I cannot spare them to watch you.”

Pete gave him a sour grin. “You feel that you have to watch me?”

Philston went back to his desk. “Don’t be a fool, Fremont. You are sitting on one of the great stories of this century, you have twenty-five thousand dollars of my money and you have not yet done your job. Surely you didn’t expect me to let you run around free?”

Philston pressed a button on his desk. “You shouldn’t have any trouble. All you really have to do is stay sober and keep your mouth shut. And since Chow thinks you have been hired to plant the Eta story you can go about setting it up, as you say, just as you would have to do normally. The only difference is that Chow won’t know which story you are setting up until it is too late. There will be someone here in a minute now—any last questions?”

“Yeah. A great big one. If I’m going to be under constant surveillance how am I going to get away from Chow and his boys to plant the story? As soon as he knows the Emperor has been assassinated he’ll kill me. It will be the first thing he does.”

Philston stroked his chin again. “That is a difficulty, I know. You must depend a great deal on yourself, of course, but I will help all I can. I am sending a man with you. One man is all I can spare, and all that Chow will permit. As it was I had to insist, on the grounds of maintaining liaison.

“You will be taken to the riot scene at the Palace grounds tomorrow, of course. Dimitri will go with you, ostensibly to help guard you. Actually, at a time best determined between the two of you, he will help you break away. You two will have to work it out

together. Dimitri is a good man, very tough and dedicated, and he will manage to get you free for a few' moments. After that you will be on your own."

There was a tapping at the door. "Come," said Philston.

The man who entered was a fugitive from a pro basketball team. The AXEman figured him at a good six feet eight. He was as thin as a slat and his long skull was mirror bald. He had acromegalic features and little dark eyes and his suit hung on him like an ill-fitting tent. His jacket sleeves were much too short and revealed dirty cuffs.

"This is Dimitri," said Philston. "He will watch you, and over you, to the best of his ability. Don't let his appearance fool you, Fremont. He is very fast and not at all stupid."

The tall scarecrow stared dully at the AXEman and nodded. He and Philston went to a far corner of the room and conferred briefly. Dimitri kept nodding and saying, "Da—Da—"

Dimitri went to the door and waited. Philston extended a hand to the man he thought was Pete Fremont. "Good luck. I will not see you again. Certainly not if all goes as planned. But I will be in contact and, if you deliver the goods, as you Yanks say, you will be paid as promised. Just keep that in mind, Fremont. Another twenty-five thousand to come in Hong Kong. Good-bye."

It was like shaking hands with a can of worms. "Good-bye," said Pete Fremont. Nick Carter thought: "I'll see you again, you sonofabitch!"

He managed to brush against Dimitri as they went out the door. There was a shoulder clip, a heavy gun, under the left shoulder.

The two Japanese gunmen were waiting in the foyer. Dimitri growled something at them and they nodded. They all went out and got into the black Mercedes. The sun had broken through the overcast and the lawn was a sparkling new green. There was a delicate smell of cherry blossoms in the steamy air.

Some comic opera country, thought Nick Carter as he climbed into the back seat with the giant. A hundred million people in an area smaller than California. Picturesque as hell. Paper umbrellas and motorcycles. Moon watchers and murderers. Insect listeners and rioters. Geishas and go-go girls. The whole thing a bomb that was fizzing on a short fuse and he was sitting on top of it.

The tall Japanese rode in front with the chauffeur. The short Japanese sat in back on a jump seat and watched Nick. Dimitri watched Nick from his corner. The Mercedes wheeled left out of the gate and headed back for central Tokyo. Nick sank back in the cushions and tried to sort it all out.

He thought about Tonaka again and it was not pleasant. There might still be a chance, of course, that he could do something. He was,

even if a little late, being turned over to Johnny Chow. That was what Chow wanted—Nick now knew why—and it should be possible to save the girl from further torture. Nick scowled at the floor of the car. He would pay off that debt when the time came.

He had gotten one enormous break. He was the beneficiary of the mistrust between the Chicoms and Philston. They were uneasy allies, their liaison was faulty and that could be exploited further.

They both thought they were dealing with Pete Fremont, thanks to Tonaka's guts and brains. No one could really stand torture for very long, not when it was administered by an expert, yet Tonaka had screamed and given them a false lead.

A thought occurred to Killmaster then and he cursed his own stupidity. He had been worrying about Johnny Chow knowing Fremont by sight. He didn't. He couldn't—otherwise Tonaka would never have given him the name in the first place. So his cover with Chow was unbroken. He could play it, as far as possible, the way Philston had indicated, all the time watching for a way to save the girl.

She would have had that in mind when she screamed his name. He was her only hope and she knew it. She would be hoping now. Bleeding and sobbing in some hold and waiting for him to come and get her out.

His guts felt a little sick. He was helpless. No weapons. Watched every minute. Tonaka was clinging to a frail reed. Killmaster had never felt lower.

The Mercedes skirted the Central Wholesale Market and headed for a causeway leading to Tsuki-shimi and the shipyards. The weak sun vanished behind a coppery haze overhanging the harbor. Air seeping into the car was laden with a brazen industrial stench. A dozen freighters lay at anchor out in the bay. They passed a drydock on which loomed the skeleton of a supertanker. Nick caught a flash of the name—Naess Maru.

The Mercedes rolled on past an area where dump trucks were tilting garbage and trash into the water. Tokyo was always building new land.

They tinned onto another causeway that led to the water's edge. Here, set a little apart, was a rotting old warehouse. End of journey, thought Nick. That's where they've got Tonaka. It was a good site, cunningly selected. Right in the middle of all the industrial hurly-burly, with no one paying any attention. They would have a good reason for coming and going.

The car pulled in through a ramshackle gate that stood open. The chauffeur kept going across a yard that was stacked with rusting oil drums. He pulled the Mercedes up alongside a loading dock.

Dimitri opened the door on his side and climbed out. The short Japanese showed his Nambu to Nick. "You also get out."

Nick got out. The Mercedes wheeled and drove back out the gate. Dimitri had one hand inside his jacket. He nodded toward a short flight of wooden stairs at the far end of the dock. "We go there. You first. Do not try funny stuff." His English was bad, thick with Slavic mistreatment of the vowels.

Funny stuff was furthest from his mind. He had one intent now, and only one. Get to the girl and save her from the knife. Somehow. Anyhow. With guile or force.

They went up the stairs, Dimitri hanging back a little and keeping his hand in his jacket.

Off to the left a door led into a tiny shabby office, derelict now. A man stood in the office, waiting for them. He stared hard at Nick.

"You are Pete Fremont?"

"Yeah. Where's Tonaka?"

The man did not answer him. He stepped around Nick, pulled a Walther pistol from his belt and shot Dimitri in the head. It was a good, professional head shot. Amateurs went for the body.

The giant crumpled slowly, like a skyscraper being demolished. He seemed to fall in pieces. Then he was all on the splintered floor of the office and blood was running from his shattered head into a crack.

The killer pointed the Walther at Nick. "You can stop lying now," he said. "I know who you are. You're Nick Carter. You're AXE. I'm Johnny Chow."

He was tall for a Japanese, too light of skin, and Nick guessed at Chinese blood. Chow was dressed for the hippie bit—tight chino pants, a psychedelic shirt that hung outside, a string of love beads around his neck.

Johnny Chow wasn't kidding. Or bluffing. He knew. So Nick said: "Okay. I'm Carter. Now where is Tonaka?"

The Walther moved. "Through that door just behind you. Move very slowly."

They went down a littered corridor illuminated by open skylights. The AXE agent noted them automatically as a possible way out.

Johnny Chow pushed open a plain deal door with a brass knob. The room was surprisingly well furnished. A girl sat on a divan with her slim legs crossed. She was wearing a red cheongsam slit nearly to the hip and her dark hair was pded atop her head. She was heavily made up and the white teeth glinted behind scarlet as she smiled at Nick.

"Hello, Carter-san. I thought you would never get here. I've missed you."

Nick Carter regarded her impassively. He did not smile. Finally he

said, “Hello, Tonaka.”

There were times, he told himself, when he was not very bright.

Chapter 11

Johnny Chow had closed the door and was lounging against it with the Walther still covering Nick.

Tonaka looked past Nick at Chow. "The Russian?"

"In the office. I killed him. No sweat."

Tonaka frowned. "You left the body there?"

A shrug. "For the time being. I—"

"You are an imbecile. Get some men and have it removed immediately. Put it downstairs with the others until dark. Wait—handcuff Carter and give me the gun."

Tonaka uncrossed her legs and got up. There was a flash of panty. Red this time. In Washington, under the Girl Scout uniform, they had been pink. A lot of things had changed since Washington.

She walked around Nick, keeping well away, and took the pistol from Johnny Chow. "Put your hands behind you, Nick."

Nick obeyed, tensing his wrist muscles, expanding the veins and arteries as best he could. You never knew. A tenth of an inch might come in handy.

The cuffs locked coldly into place. Chow gave him a push. "Over there on that chair in the corner."

Nick walked to the chair and sat down, his manacled hands behind him. He kept his head down, his eyes hooded. Tonaka was in a euphoric mood, giddy with triumph. He knew the signs. She was going to talk. He was prepared to listen. There was not much else he could do. The taste of that was sour vinegar in his mouth.

Johnny Chow went out and closed the door. Tonaka locked it. She went back to the divan and sat down, crossing her legs again with a flourish. She rested the Walther in her lap, the dark eyes watching him.

She gave him a triumphant smile. "Why don't you admit it, Nick? You're totally surprised. Shocked. You never dreamed it."

He was testing the handcuffs. There was just a little play. Not enough to help him now. But they were not snug around his big bony wrists.

"You're right," he admitted. "You conned me, Tonaka. Conned me good. The thought did occur to me, just after your father was killed, but I never went back to it. I was thinking too much about Kunizo and not enough about you. I'm pretty stupid at times."

"Yes. You have been very stupid. Or perhaps not. How could you possibly have guessed? Everything fell into place so perfectly for me—everything fitted so well. Even my father sending me for you. It was a

remarkable piece of luck for us.”

“Your father was a pretty smart guy. I’m surprised he didn’t catch on.”

Her smile vanished. “I am not happy about what happened to my father. Yet it had to be. He was causing too much trouble. We have organized the Eta men very well—the Society of the Bloody Buddha keeps them in line—but the Eta women are another matter. They were getting out of hand. Even I, pretending to be their leader, could not handle it. Father was beginning to bypass me and work directly with some of the other women. He had to be killed, as much as I regret it.”

Nick studied her with narrowed eyes. “Can I have a cigarette now?”

“No. I am not going to get that close to you.” Her smile came again. “That is another thing I regret, that I will never be able to keep that promise I made. I think it would have been nice.”

He nodded. “It might at that.” So far there had been no slightest hint that she, or Chow, knew anything of Philston’s plot to kill the Emperor. It was a trump he held; at the moment he had no idea how to play it, or if it should be played at all.

Tonaka crossed her legs again. The cheongsam hiked up to reveal the curve of her buttock.

“Before Johnny Chow comes back I had better warn you, Nick. Don’t antagonize him. He is, I think, just a little crazy. And he is a sadist. You received the—the parcel?”

He stared at her. “I got it. I thought it was yours.” He shifted his glance to her full breasts. “Obviously it wasn’t.”

She did not look at him. He sensed the uneasiness in her. “No. That was—nasty. But I could not prevent it. I can only control Johnny to a point. He has these—these compulsions to cruelty. Sometimes I have to let him have his way. Afterwards he is docile and easy to handle for a time. That—flesh he sent was from an Eta girl we had to kill.”

He nodded. “This place is the killing ground, then?”

“Yes. And for torture. It is not a thing I like, but it must be done.”

“It’s very handy. Next to the harbor.”

Her smile was weary behind the makeup. The Walther drooped in her hand. She brought it up again, holding it in both hands. “Yes. But we are at war and in war terrible things must be done. But enough of that. We must talk about you, Nick Carter. I want to get you to Peking safely. That is why I warn you about Johnny.”

His look was sardonic. “Peking, eh? I’ve been there a couple of times. Incognito, of course. I don’t like the place. Dull. Very dull.”

“I doubt that you will find it dull this time. They are preparing quite a reception for you. And for me. In case you have not guessed, Nick, I am Hai-Wai.”

He tested the handcuffs again. He was going to have to break a hand, if the chance came.

Hai-Wai Tio Pu. Chinese intelligence.

"It had just occurred to me," he said. "What rank and name, Tonaka?" She wouldn't tell him.

She surprised him. "I am a full Colonel. My Chinese name is Mei Foy. It is one of the reasons I had to remain so estranged from my father—he still had many contacts and sooner or later he would have found out. So I had to pretend to hate him because he deserted his people, the Eta, when he was young. He was Eta. As I am. But he passed over, he forgot his people and served the imperialist establishment Until he was old and sick. Then he tried to make amends!"

Nick did not resist the sneer. "While you remained an Eta? Faithful to your people—so you could infiltrate and betray them. Use them. Destroy them."

She did not respond to the taunt. "You would not understand, of course. My people will never be anything until they revolt and take over Japan. I am leading them in that direction."

Leading them to massacre. If Philston did manage to kill the Emperor and foist blame on the Chinese, the Burakumin would be the nearest scapegoat at hand. The enraged Japanese might not be able to reach into Peking—they could, and would, murder every Eta man, woman and child they could find. Behead them, gut them, hang them, shoot them. If it happened the Sanya district was going to be a charnel house indeed.

For a moment the AXE agent struggled with conscience and judgment. If he told them of Philston's plot they might believe him enough to set an additional watch on the man. Or they might not believe him at all. They might foul it up somehow. And Philston, if he suspected that he was suspected, would simply cancel his plans and wait for another opportunity. Nick kept his mouth shut and his eyes down, watching the tiny red highheeled slipper swing on Tonaka's foot. Light glinted along her bare brown thigh.

A rap came on the door. Tonaka admitted Johnny Chow.

"The Russian is taken care of. How is our friend getting along? The great Nick Carter! Killmaster! The man that makes all the poor little spies tremble when they hear his name."

Chow walked to the chair and stood glowering down at Nick Carter. His dark hair was thick and tangled, growing low on his neck. His bushy brows made a black slant over his nose. His teeth were big and chalky white, gapped in the middle. He spat on the AXEmen and slapped him heavily across the face.

"How does it feel, cheap killer? How do you like being on the

receiving end?"

Nick kept his eyes narrowed against another blow. He could taste the blood from a cut lip. He saw Tonaka shake her head in warning. She was right. Chow was a manic killer, consumed with hate, and this was no time to goad him. Nick was silent.

Chow slapped him again, then again, back and forth. "What's the matter, big man? Nothing to say?"

Tonaka said: "That will be enough, Johnny."

He swung on her, snarling. "Who says it will be enough!"

"I say it. And I command here. Peking wants him alive and in good shape. A corpse or a cripple will not do them much good."

Nick watched with interest. A quarrel in the family. Tonaka swung the Walther ever so slightly, so that it covered Johnny Chow as well as Nick. There was a moment of silence.

Chow emitted a final snarl. "I say screw you and Peking too. Do you know how many of our comrades, all over the world, that this bastard has killed?"

"He will pay for that. In time. But first Peking wants him for questioning—and do not think that that will be pleasant for him! So come on, Johnny. Calm down. This must be done in the proper way. We have orders and they must be followed."

"All right. All right! but I know what I'd do to this stinking bastard if I had my way. I'd cut off his balls and make him eat—"

His rumbling of discontent died away. He went to the divan and slouched down, sullen, his full red mouth pouting like a child's.

Nick felt the cold seeping along his spine. Tonaka was right. Johnny Chow was a sadist and a homicidal maniac. He wondered that the Chinese apparatus had tolerated him so far. Men like Chow could be a liability and the Chinese were anything but fools. But there was another side to it—Chow would be an absolutely dependable and ruthless killer. The fact probably canceled out his sins.

Johnny Chow sat upright on the divan. He grinned, showing his gap teeth. "At least we can make the sonofabitch watch us work the girl over. The man just brought her in. It won't hurt him and it might even convince him of a thing or two—like maybe that AXE is all washed up."

He turned to glare at Tonaka. "And it's no use you trying to stop me! I'm doing most of the work in this lousy operation and I'm going to have some fun out of it—"

Nick, watching Tonaka narrowly, saw her capitulate. She nodded slowly. "All right, Johnny. If you want to. But be very careful—he's as tricky and slippery as an eel."

"Hah!" Chow came to Nick and struck him across the face again. "I hope he does try tricks. That's all I want—an excuse to kill him. A real

good excuse— then I can tell Peking to go fly a kite.”

He hauled Nick to his feet, cuffed him a couple of times and pushed him toward the door. “Walk, Mr. Killmaster. You’ve got a treat coming. I’m going to show you what happens to people that disagree with us.”

He snatched the Walther from Tonaka. She surrendered it meekly and would not meet Nick’s eyes. He began to have a nasty premonition. A girl? Just brought in? He remembered the orders he had given the girls in the geisha house. To Mato, Sato and Kato. God! If something had gone wrong he was to blame. His fault-Johnny Chow pushed him down a long hall and then down twisting stairs, rotting and creaking, to a filthy basement where rats scuttled at their approach. Tonaka came after them and Nick could sense the reluctance in her step. She really doesn’t like the nasty parts, he thought bitterly. Yet she does it because she’s dedicated to her unholy Communist cause. He would never understand them. All he could do was fight them.

They went down another corridor, narrow and stinking of human feces. It was lined by doors, each with a tiny barred window set high up. He sensed, rather than heard, movement behind the doors. This was their prison, their execution ground. From somewhere outside, penetrating even to these dismal depths, came the deep lowing of a tug in the harbor. So near to the salt-washed freedom of the sea—and so far.

Suddenly he knew, with absolute clarity, what he was going to see.

The corridor ended in another door. It was guarded by a roughly dressed Japanese wearing rubber shoes. He had an old Chicago-type Tommy gun slung over one shoulder. The AXEman, as preoccupied as he was, still noticed the man’s round eyes and heavy stubble. Ainu. The hairy people of Hokkaido, of aboriginal stock and not Japanese at all. The Chicoms were casting a wide net in Japan.

The man stood aside with a bow. Johnny Chow opened the door and shoved Nick into a glare of light shed by the single 350-watt bulb. After the dimness his eyes rebelled and he blinked for a moment. Gradually he made out the face of a woman enclosed in a shiny stainless steel Buddha. The Buddha had no head and from the truncated neck, lolling and limp, eyes closed, blood trickling from nose and mouth, protruded the livid face of a woman.

Kato!

Chapter 12

Johnny Chow pushed Nick to one side, then closed and locked the door. He went toward the shining Buddha. Nick vented his rage the only way he could—he tugged at the handcuffs until he felt the skin break.

Tonaka was whispering. “I am really sorry about this, Nick. It could not be helped. I forgot something important and had to go back to my apartment. Kato was there. I don’t know why. Johnny Chow was with me and she saw him. We had to take her then— there was nothing else I could do.”

He was savage. “So you had to take her. Do you have to torture her?”

She bit her lip and nodded toward Johnny Chow. “He does. I told you—it is how he gets his kicks. I did try, Nick, I really did! I wanted to kill her quickly and painlessly.”

“You’re an angel of mercy.”

Chow said: “How do you like it, big Killmaster man? She don’t look so good now, huh? Not as good as when you banged her this morning, I’d bet.”

That, of course, would be part of the man’s perversion. Intimate questions asked under torture. Nick could imagine the leer and the frenzy.

He knew the risk, yet all the threats in the world could not have kept him from saying it. It was not in his nature not to say it. He had to say it.

He said it calmly and coldly, his voice dripping ice. “You’re a miserable, nasty, perverted sonofabitch, Chow. One of the great pleasures of my life will be killing you.”

Tonaka hissed softly. “No! Don’t—”

If Johnny Chow heard the words he was too engrossed to pay any attention. His pleasure was obvious. He twined a hand into Kato’s thick black hair and jerked her head back. Her face was bloodless, as chalky white as though she wore geisha makeup. Her pale tongue protruded from the bloody mouth. Chow began to slap her, working himself into a rage.

“She’s faking, the little bitch. She’s not dead yet.”

Nick wished her dead with all his heart. It was all he could do. He watched the slow trickle of the blood, sluggish now, in the upcurved gutter built around the base of the Buddha. The machine was well named—the Bloody Buddha.

It was his fault. He had sent Kato to Tonaka’s apartment to wait.

He had wanted her out of the geisha house, which he had judged unsafe, and he had wanted her out of the way and near a phone in case he needed her. Goddamn it to hell! He twisted at the cuffs in a fury. Pain lanced through his wrists and forearms. He had sent Kato straight into the trap. It was not his fault, in any realistic sense, yet the onus lay on his heart like a stone.

Johnny Chow stopped slapping the unconscious girl. He scowled. "Maybe she is dead already," he said doubtfully. "None of these little whores have any strength."

At that moment Kato opened her eyes. She was dying. She was down to her last drop of blood. Yet she looked across the room and saw Nick. Somehow, perhaps with the clarity that is said to come just before death, she recognized him. She tried to smile, a pitiful effort. Her whisper, the ghost of a voice, quavered across the room.

"I sorry, Nick. I—so—sorry—"

Nick Carter kept his eyes away from those of Chow. He was sane again now and he did not want the man to read what was in his eyes. The man was a monster. Tonaka was right. If he was ever going to have a chance to strike back he had to play it cool. Very cool. For now he had to take it.

Johnny Chow thrust Kato's head away from him with a savage movement that broke the neck. The crack was plainly audible in the room. Nick saw Tonaka wince. Was she losing her nerve? Possible angle there.

Chow stared down at the dead girl. His voice was plaintive, that of a little boy who has broken a favorite toy. "She died too soon. Why? She didn't have any right to do that." He laughed, a sound like rats squealing in the night.

"There is still you, big AXEman. I bet you'd last a long time in the Buddha."

"No," said Tonaka. "Definitely no, Johnny. Come on, now. Let's get out of this place. We've got a lot to do."

For a moment he stared defiantly at her with eyes as flat and deadly as a cobra's. He brushed the long hair out of his eyes. He made a noose of the love beads and dangled it before him. He looked down at the Walther in his hand.

"I've got the gun," he said. "That makes me boss. Honcho! I can do anything I want."

Tonaka laughed. It was a good try, but Nick heard the tension uncoiling like a spring.

"Johnny, Johnny! What is it? You're acting like a fool and I know you're not. Do you want to get us all killed? You know what will happen if we disobey orders. Come on, Johnny. Be a good boy and listen to mama-san."

She was cajoling him like a baby. Nick listened. It was his life that was on the toss.

Tonaka went close to Johnny Chow. She put her hand on his shoulder and leaned close to his ear. She whispered. The AXEman could imagine what she was saying. She was buying him out of the mood with her body. He wondered how many times she had done it.

Johnny Chow smiled. He wiped his bloody hands on the chino pants. "You will? You really promise?"

"I will. I promise." She ran a caressing hand down his front. "As soon as we get him safely put away. Okay?"

He grinned, showing the gaps in his blocky white teeth. "Okay. Let's get it done. Here—you take the gun and cover me."

Tonaka took the Walther and stepped to one side. Beneath the heavy makeup her face was impassive, as undecipherable as a Noh mask. She trained the gun on Nick.

Nick could not resist it. "You pay a pretty heavy price," he said. "Sleeping with scum like this."

Johnny Chow smashed him in the face with his fist. Nick reeled and went to one knee. Chow kicked him in the temple and for a moment darkness swirled around the AXE agent. He swayed on his knees, out of balance because of his hands cuffed behind him, and shook his head to clear it. Lights exploded in his brain like magnesium flares.

"No more!" snapped Tonaka. "You want me to keep my promise, Johnny?"

"All right! He's not hurt." Chow got a hand in Nick's collar and hauled him to his feet.

They took him back upstairs, to a small barren room near the office. It had a metal door with a heavy iron bar on the outside. There was nothing in the room but a filthy bed pad near a pipe that ran from floor to ceiling. High up on the wall, near the pipe, was a grilled window, glassless and too small for a midget to slip through.

Johnny Chow shoved Nick toward the bed pad. "First class hotel, big man. Get around on the other side and cover him, Tonaka, while I switch the cuffs."

The girl obeyed. "You'll stay here, Carter, until after the—the business tomorrow night. Then we'll take you out to sea and put you aboard a Chinese freighter. In three days you'll be in Peking. They will be most happy to see you—they are preparing a reception now."

Chow took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs. Killmaster was tempted to try it then. But Tonaka was ten feet from him, against the opposite wall, and the Walther was level on his belly. No use grabbing Chow and using him for a shield. She would kill them both. So he declined suicide and watched Chow snap one of the cuffs

around the vertical pipe.

"That should hold even the great Killmaster," Chow sneered. "Unless he's got a magic kit in his pocket—and I don't think he has." He slapped Nick hard across the face. "Sit down, you bastard, and keep quiet. You got the needle ready, Tonaka?"

Nick slid down to a sitting position, his right wrist extended and linked to the pipe. Tonaka handed Johnny Chow a glistening hypodermic needle. He pushed Nick's head down with one hand and slammed the needle into the back of his neck just above the collar of the trenchcoat. He was trying to hurt and he did. The needle felt like a dagger as Chow rammed the plunger down.

Tonaka said: "Just something to put you to sleep for a while. Keep you quiet. It won't hurt you."

Johnny Chow yanked out the needle. "I'd like to hurt him. If I had my way—"

"You haven't," the girl said sharply. "That's all we need to do now. He'll keep. Come on, Johnny."

Seeing Chow still hesitate, glaring down at Nick, she added in a wheedling tone. "Please, Johnny. You know what I promised—there won't be time unless we hurry."

Chow gave Nick a parting kick in the ribs. "Sayonara, big man. I'll think about you while I'm screwing her. That's the closest you'll ever get to it again."

The metal door closed. He heard the heavy bar drop into place. He was alone, with a drug working in his veins that was going to knock him out any second now—for how long he had no idea.

Nick staggered to his feet. He was already a little woozy, lightheaded, but that might be from the beating he had taken. He shot a glance at the tiny window high above him and dismissed it. Nothing there. Nothing anywhere." Nothing at all. The pipe, the cuffs, the filthy bed mat.

With his free left hand he fumbled through the ripped pocket of the trenchcoat into his jacket pocket. Matches and cigarettes had been left him. And the packet of money. Johnny Chow had given him a fast frisking, almost carelessly so, and he had felt the money, fingered it, then had apparently forgotten it. He had not mentioned it to Tonaka. Nick thought back—it had been cleverly done. Chow must have his own plans for that money.

What matter? Twenty-five thousand dollars wasn't doing him a bit of good now. It wouldn't buy a key to the handcuffs.

He could feel the drug hitting him now. He was swaying and his head was a balloon trying to take off on free flight. He fought it off, trying to breathe deeply, the sweat pouring into his eyes.

He was staying on his feet by sheer will. He stood as far away from

the pipe as he could, his right arm extended. He leaned away, using his two hundred pounds, his thumb folded across the palm of his right hand, compressing the muscles and bones. There are tricks in every trade and he knew it was possible, sometimes, to pull your way out of a cuff. The trick was to have a little clearance, a little play, between the cuff and the bones. Flesh did not matter. It could be torn away.

He did have a little clearance, but not enough. It wasn't going to work. He gave a sudden tremendous jerk. Pain and blood. That was all. The cuff slid down and locked at the base of his thumb. If he had something to grease it with—

His head was a balloon now. A balloon with his face painted on it. It flew off his shoulders and away skyward on a long, long string.

Chapter 13

He awoke in total darkness. His head ached badly and his body was one huge bruise. His lacerated right wrist throbbed with a sharper pain. Through the tiny window overhead drifted occasional harbor sounds.

For a quarter of an hour he lay in the darkness and tried to bring his jumbled thoughts together, to fit the jigsaw pieces into a clear picture of reality. He tested the cuff and the pipe again. Nothing had changed. Still trapped, helpless, immobile. He had an idea that he had been unconscious a long time. His thirst was a live thing clawing at his throat.

Painfully he got to his knees. He took the matches from his jacket pocket and, after two failures, managed to keep one of the paper matches glowing. He had had visitors.

There was a tray on the floor near him. There was something on it. Something covered with a napkin. The match burnt his fingers. He lit another one and, still on his knees, reached for the tray. Tonaka might have thought to bring him water. He snatched away the napkin.

Her eyes were open and staring at him. The tiny flambeau of the match was reflected in the dead pupils. Kato's head lay on its side, on a plate. Dark, hair strayed wildly down to the severed neck.

Johnny Chow getting his kicks.

Nick Carter was sick without shame. He vomited on the floor beside the tray, retching and spewing until he was empty. Empty of everything but hate. In the fetid dark his professionalism went by the board and he wanted only to find Johnny Chow and kill him as painfully as possible.

After a time he lit another match. He was covering the head with the napkin when his hand touched the hair. The elaborate geisha hairdo was a wreck, straggling and collapsed, thick with oil. Oil!

The match went out. Nick thrust his hand deep into the massy pile of hair and worked it around. The head moved to his touch and nearly fell and rolled beyond his reach. He pulled the tray closer and wedged it with his feet. When his left hand was thickly coated with the hair oil he transferred it to his right wrist, rubbing it up and down and around on the inside of the steel cuff. He did this a dozen times, then he pushed the tray away and stood erect.

He took a dozen deep breaths. The air filtering in through the window was tinged with shipyard smoke. Someone moved in the corridor outside the room and he listened. After a time the sounds fitted into a pattern. A guard in the corridor. A guard wearing rubber

shoes as he walked his post. No mistaking that Oriental slip-slop-slip-slop as the man paced up and down the corridor.

He moved as far to his left as he could, pulling steadily against the manacle that bound him to the pipe. Sweat started on him as he put every ounce of his great strength into the effort. The cuff slid down on his greased hand, slid a little more, then locked at his big knuckles. Killmaster strained again. Agony now. No good. It wasn't working.

All right. He admitted that it was going to mean broken bones. So get it over with.

He stepped as close to the pipe as he could, pulling the cuff up the pipe until it was level with his shoulders. His wrist, hand and the cuff were all slimed with bloody hair oil. He should be able to do it. All it needed was resolution.

Killmaster took one deep breath, held it, then lunged away from the pipe. All the hate and fury that was boiling in him went into the lunge. He had been an All-American halfback once and men still spoke with awe of the manner in which he smashed opposing lines. The way he exploded now.

The pain was brief and terrible. The steel gouged cruel furrows in his flesh and he felt the bones go. He reeled against the wall near the door, clinging for support, his right hand a dangling bloody wreck at his side. He was free.

Free? There was still the metal door and the heavy bar. It was going to take guile now. Courage and brute power had brought him as far as they could.

Nick leaned against the wall, panting, listening intently. The guard in the corridor was still slip-slopping up and down, the rubber shoes sibilant on the rough boards.

He stood in the dark and weighed the decision. He was only going to get one chance. If he muffed it everything was lost.

Nick glanced at the window. Dark. But what day? What night? Had he slept the clock around and more? He had a hunch that he had. If so then this was the night set for the riots and the sabotage. That meant that Tonaka and Johnny Chow would not be around. They would be somewhere in central Tokyo, busy with their murderous plans. And Philston? Philston would be smiling that upper-class, epicene smile of his and getting ready to assassinate the Emperor of Japan.

The AXEmen was aware of a sudden desperate urgency. If his thinking was correct it might already be too late. In any event there was no time to lose— and he must stake everything on a single cast of the die. It was pure gamble now. If Chow and Tonka were still around he was dead. They had brains and guns and they wouldn't be fooled by his tricks.

He struck a match, noting that he only had three left. It should be

enough. He dragged the bed mat over near the door, and stood on it and began ripping it to pieces with his left hand. His right was useless.

When he had enough cotton out of the thin pad he pushed it into a pile near the crack beneath the door. Not enough. He pulled more cotton from the pad. Then, to conserve his matches in case the stuff did not catch at once, he reached into his pocket for the money, meaning to twist a bill into a spill and use that. The money was gone. The match went out.

Nick cursed softly. Johnny Chow had taken the money when he slipped in with Kato's head on the tray.

Three matches left now. New sweat broke out on him and he could not keep his fingers from trembling as he carefully fit another match and held it to the cotton. A tiny flame flickered, wavered, nearly went out, caught again and began to grow. Smoke began to curl upward.

Nick wriggled out of the old trenchcoat and began to fan the smoke with it, directing it out under the door. The cotton was blazing now. If this didn't work he just might kill himself by asphyxiation. It was easy to do. He held his breath and kept waving the trenchcoat, sweeping the smoke under the door.

That was enough. Nick started yelling at the top of his voice.

"Fire! Fire! Help—help— Fire! Help me—don't let me burn. Fire!"

Now he would know.

He stood away from the door, flattened against the wall to one side. The door opened outward.

The cotton was blazing merrily now and the room was filling with acrid smoke. He didn't have to fake the coughing. He screamed again: "Fire! Help—tasukete! Tasukete! Hi—Hi!"

Slip-slop-slip-slop-slippety-slop-slop. The guard was running down the corridor. Nick let out a wail of terror. "Tasukete!"

The heavy bar dropped with a bang. The door opened a few inches. The smoke billowed out. Nick had tucked his useless right hand into the pocket of his jacket, to keep it out of the way. Now he snarled deep in his throat and rammed his big shoulders at the door. He was like a massive spring that has been coiled too long and is at last released.

The door slammed outward with a bang, knocking the guard backward and off balance. It was the Ainu he had seen earlier. He had the Tommy gun in front of him, at the ready, and as Nick ducked in under it the man squeezed off a burst by reflex. Flame seared the AXEman's face. He put everything he had into a short left hand to the man's gut. He bulled him back against the wall and put a knee in his groin and butted him in the face. The guard let out a bubbling groan and began to fall. Nick slashed him across the Adam's apple with his hand and butted him again. Teeth broke and blood gushed from the

man's ruined mouth. He let go the Tommy gun. Nick grabbed it before it hit the floor.

The guard was still only halfway down, leaning drunkenly against the wall. Nick kicked his legs from under him and he went crashing down.

The machine gun was heavy even for Nick, with his one good hand, and it took him a second to get it balanced. The guard tried to get up. Nick kicked him in the face.

He stood over the man and put the muzzle of the Tommy gun within an inch of his head. The guard was still conscious enough to look past the muzzle and up the barrel to the clip where the heavy .45's waited with deadly patience to tear him apart.

"Where is Johnny Chow? Where is the girl? One second and I kill you!"

The guard did not doubt it. He kept very quiet and stammered out the words in a bloody froth.

"They go Toyo—go Toyo! Go for make riots, fires, I swear. I tell—you not kill!"

Toyo must mean central Tokyo. Downtown. He'd guessed right. He had been out over twenty-four hours.

He put a foot on the man's chest. "Who else is around here? Other men? Here? They did not leave you to guard me alone?"

"One man. One man only. Now sleep in office, I swear."

Sleep. Through all this? Nick slammed the guard over the skull with the butt of the Tommy gun. He turned and ran down the corridor toward the office where Johnny Chow had shot the Russian, Dimitri.

There was a spurt of flame from the office door and a slug made a nasty noise past Nick's left ear. Sleeping, hell! The bastard was awake now and he had Nick cut off from the yard. There was no time to go exploring, to try to find another way out.

Blam-BLAM—

A hornet sound, too close. A slug gouged the wall just beside him. Nick turned, shot out the single dim light in the corridor and ran back toward the stairs that led down to the dungeons. He vaulted the body of the unconscious guard and kept running.

Silence now. Silence and darkness. The man in the office was reloading and waiting.

Nick Carter stopped running. He fell to his belly and crawled until he could look up and see, barely see, the lighter rectangle of an open skylight above him. A waft of cool air came down and he saw a star, a single faint star, glittering in the center of the square. He tried to remember how high up the skylights were. He had noted them yesterday when they brought him in. He couldn't remember and knew it didn't matter. He had to try it anyway.

He tossed the Tommy gun up through the skylight. It hit and bounced and made a hell of a racket. The man in the office heard it and opened fire again, pouring lead down the narrow corridor. Nick hugged the floor. One of the bullets ticked through his hair without touching the scalp. He exhaled silently. Christ! That was close.

The man in the office emptied his magazine. Silence again. Nick stood up, tensed his legs and leaped, reaching with his good left hand. His fingers locked over the coaming of the skylight and he hung swaying for a moment, then began to pull himself up. His arm tendons cracked and complained. He grinned bitterly in the dark. All those thousands of one-arm chin-ups were paying-off now.

He got his elbow over the coaming and swung his legs out. He was on the roof of the warehouse. Around him the shipyards were silent and desolate, but here and there lights were on in warehouses and the docks. One especially bright light glittered like a constellation from the top of a crane.

No blackout yet Over Tokyo the sky was brilliant with reflected neon. A red warning winked from the top of Tokyo Tower and far to the south searchlights were radiating over the International Airport. Some two miles to the west was the Imperial Palace. Where was Richard Philston at this moment?

He found the Tommy gun and cradled it in the crook of his good arm. Then, running softly, the way a man runs over freight cars, he went down the length of the warehouse. He could see well enough now to leap each skylight as he came to it

After the last skylight the budding widened and he knew he was over the office and near the loading dock. He went on tiptoe, making very little sound on the tar paper. A single dim light gleamed on a standard in the yard where the rusty oil drums marched like globular phantoms. Something near the gate caught the light and reflected it and he saw that it was a jeep. Painted black. His heart leaped and he felt the beginning of real hope. There might yet be a chance to stop Philston. The jeep meant a way into town. But first he had to get across the yard. That wasn't going to be easy. The single light gave just enough illumination for that bastard in the office to see him. He didn't dare try to shoot out the light Might as well send in his calling card.

There was no time to ponder. He just had to barge ahead and take his chances. He ran on, over the roof extension that covered the loading dock, trying to get as far from the office as possible. He reached the end of the roof and looked down. There was a stack of oil drums directly under him. They looked rickety.

Nick slung the Tommy gun over his shoulder and, cursing his useless right hand, let himself gently over the edge of the roof. His

fingers clutched the gutter. It began to sag and tear away. His toes touched the oil drums. Nick let out a breath of relief—then the gutter tore away in his hand and his full weight came down on the drums. The stack swayed perilously, sagged, gave way in the middle and came crashing down with the sound of a boiler factory in full production.

The AXE agent was lucky he wasn't killed then and there. As it was he lost a lot of skin before he managed to scramble free and start running for the jeep. Nothing else for it now. It was the only game in town. He ran awkwardly, limping because a half full drum had bruised his ankle. He carried the Tommy gun half on its side, the butt against his belly and the muzzle trained on the loading dock near the office door. He wondered how many bullets he had left in the clip.

The man in the office was no coward. He ran out of the office, spotted Nick zigzagging across the yard and let go with his pistol. Dirt kicked up around Nick's feet and a slug kissed his cheek as it passed. He ran on, not firing back, really worrying about the clip now. He should have checked it.

The gunner left the loading dock and ran toward the jeep, trying to cut Nick off. He kept sniping at Nick as he ran, but his fire was erratic and way off.

Nick still did not shoot back, not until they nearly met at the jeep. The range was point blank. The man whirled and took aim this time, holding his pistol with two hands to steady it. Nick dropped to one knee, balanced the Tommy gun over his knee and let the clip go.

The machine gun raved in the night. Most of the slugs took the man in the belly and blew him backward to drape him over the jeep's hood. His pistol clattered to the ground.

Nick dropped the Tommy gun and ran to the jeep. The man was dead, his guts shot out. Nick pulled him off the jeep and went through his pockets. He found three spare clips and a hunting knife with a four-inch blade. His smile was cold. This was more like it. A Tommy gun wasn't the weapon to cart around Tokyo.

He picked up the dead man's pistol. An old Browning .38—these Chicoms had a weird assortment of weapons. Collected in China and smuggled into various countries. Ammo would be the real problem—but they seemed to solve that somehow.

He slipped the Browning into his belt, the hunting knife into a jacket pocket and legged into the jeep. The keys were in the ignition. He twisted, jammed the starter and the old vehicle came to life with a shattering roar of exhaust. No muffler!

The gate was open. He shoved his foot down and the old rattletrap went banging and skidding over the oily concrete. He headed for the causeway. Tokyo glowed in the misty night like a huge iridescent

bauble. No blackout yet. What in hell time was it?

He reached the end of the causeway and found the answer. A clock in a window said: 9.33. Beyond the clock was a phone kiosk. Killmaster hesitated, then jammed on the brakes, leaped out of the jeep and ran to the kiosk. He really didn't want to do it—he wanted to follow through and clean this thing up himself. But he'd better not. Too risky. Things had gone too far. He would have to call the American Embassy and ask for help. For a moment he racked his brain, trying to remember the recognition code of the week, got it and went into the booth.

He didn't have a coin to his name.

Nick stared at the phone in rage and frustration. Goddamnit! By the time he could explain to a Japanese operator, coax her into putting him through to the Embassy, it would be too late. It was probably too late now.

At that moment the light in the kiosk went out. All around him, up and down the street, in the shops and stores and houses and taverns, the lights went out.

Nick picked up the phone and listened for a second. Dead. Too late. He was right back on his own. He ran back to the jeep.

The great city lay in darkness except for a central smudge of light near Tokyo Station. Nick switched on the jeep lights and drove as fast as he could toward that solitary swatch of brilliance in the gloom. Tokyo Station must have its own power. Something to do with the electric trains that ran in and out.

As he drove, leaning on the jeep's harshly croaking horn—for people were beginning to come into the streets now—he saw that the blackout was not as total as he supposed. Central Tokyo was out, except for the Station, but around the perimeter of the city there were still patches of light. It was a matter of individual transformers and sub-stations and Johnny Chow's people couldn't knock them all out at once. It would take time.

One of the patches on the horizon flickered and went out. They were getting around to it!

He got into a boil of traffic and had to slow down. Many drivers had pulled over and were waiting to see what would happen. A stalled electric tram blocked an intersection. Nick steered around it and kept inching the jeep through the crowd.

Candles and lamps were flickering like big fireflies in the houses. He passed a group of laughing kids on a corner. To them it was a real ball.

At Ginza dori he swung left. He could make a right at Sotobori dori, go a couple of blocks, then turn north on a street that would take him straight into the Palace grounds. He knew a postern there that led

to a bridge over the moat. The place would be crawling with cops , and the military, of course, but that was all right. He just had to find someone with enough authority, make them listen to him and get the Emperor into hiding and safety.

He wheeled into Sotobori. Just ahead, beyond where he intended to swing north, were the spacious grounds of the American Embassy. Killmaster was sorely tempted. He needed help! This thing was getting too big for him. But it was a matter of seconds, precious seconds, and he couldn't afford the loss of even one second. As he pushed the jeep, tires screaming around the corner the fights in the Embassy came on again. Emergency generator. It occurred to him then that the Palace would also have emergency generators, would use them, and Philston must have known this. Nick shrugged his big shoulders and stamped hard on the gas, trying to push it down through the floorboards. Just get there. In time.

He could hear the sullen murmur of the crowd now. Nasty. He had heard mobs before and they always scared him a little, as much as anything ever frightened him. A mob was unpredictable, a crazed beast that might do anything.

He heard shooting. A ragged scatter of shots in the dark, just ahead. Fire, raw and savage, stained the blackness. He came to an intersection. The Palace grounds were only three blocks ahead now. A burning police car lay on its side. It exploded and the blazing fragments trailed up and out like miniature rockets. The mob surged back, screaming and running for cover. Farther down the street three more police cars were blocking the way, their moving spotlights playing over the packed throng. Behind them a fire truck was moving into place beside a hydrant and Nick caught a glimpse of a water cannon.

A thin line of police came down the street. They wore riot helmets and carried batons and pistols. Behind them more police were firing tear gas over the line and into the crowd. Nick heard the gas shells break and diffuse with the typical damp thuuuckk—thuuuckk. The stink of the lacrimators wafted through the crowd. Men and women gasped and coughed as the gas took hold. The retreat began to turn into a rout. Nick, helpless, swung the jeep to the curb and waited. The throng broke on the jeep, like sea on a headland, and flowed around it.

Nick stood up in the jeep. Looking over the mob, beyond the pursuing police and the high wall, he could see lights here and there in the Palace and grounds. They were using the generators. That was going to make Philston's job tougher. Or was it? Uneasiness plagued the AXEman. Philston would have known about the generators and discounted them. How did he expect to get to the Emperor?

He saw Johnny Chow then, behind him. The man was standing on top of a car and screaming at the mob streaming past. One of the spotlights on a police car picked him up and held him steady in a bar of light. Chow kept waving his arms and haranguing and, gradually, the mob's flow began to slow. They were listening now. They had stopped running.

Tonaka, standing near the right fender of the car, was splashed by the spotlight. She was all in black, slacks, sweater, her hair done up in a kerchief. She stared up at the screeching Johnny Chow, her eyes narrowed, an odd composure about her, paying no heed to the crowd that jostled and pushed about the car.

It was impossible to hear what Johnny Chow was saying. His mouth opened and words came out and he kept pointing around him. But the mob had stopped running now. It began to thicken and clot. They were listening again. From the police lines came a shrilling of whistles and the line of cops began to fall back. A mistake, Nick thought. Should have kept them on the run. But the cops were far outnumbered and they were playing it safe.

He saw the men in the gas masks, at least a hundred of them. They swirled around the car where Chow was preaching and they all carried some sort of weapon—clubs, swords, guns and knives. Nick caught a flash of a Sten gun. This was the hard core, the real trouble-makers, and with the weapons and gas masks they meant to lead the mob through the police lines and into the Palace grounds.

Johnny Chow was still yelling and pointing toward the Palace. Tonaka watched from below, her face impassive. The men in gas masks began to form a crude front, shifting into ranks.

Killmaster glanced around. The jeep was caught in the press of the mob and he was looking over a sea of angry faces to where the spotlight still limned Johnny Chow. The police were showing restraint, but they were getting a good look; at the bastard.

Nick eased the Browning out of his belt. He cast a glance down. No one in all the thousands was paying him the slightest attention. He was the invisible man. Johnny Chow was the cynosure. He was in the limelight at last. Killmaster smiled briefly. He would never get another chance like this.

It would have to be fast. This mob was capable of anything. They would tear him into bloody bits.

He guessed the range at about thirty yards. Thirty yards with a strange gun he had never fired.

The police spotlight was still pinned on Johnny Chow. He wore it like a halo, unafraid, reveling in it, spitting and shouting out his hate. The ranks of armed and gas-masked men formed into a wedge and began to move toward the police lines.

Nick Carter brought the Browning up and leveled it. He took a quick deep breath, let half of it out, then pulled the trigger three times.

He could barely hear the shots over the mob's sound. He saw Johnny Chow spin atop the car, grab at his chest, then fall. Nick leaped from the jeep, as far out into the throng as he could push himself. He came down into a writhing mass of shoving bodies, struck out with his good hand, smashing a space clear, and began to work his way to the fringe of the mob. Only one man tried to stop him. Nick put an inch of hunting knife into him and kept going.

He had worked his way into the partial shelter of a hedge lining the beginning of Palace lawn when he caught the new note of the crowd. He crouched in the hedge, disheveled and bloody, and watched the mob charge the police again. The cadre of armed men was in the van, led by Tonaka. She waved a small Chinese flag—all her cover gone now—and she ran screaming at the head of the tattered, irregular wave of humanity.

A scatter of shots came from the police. No one fell. They were still firing high. The mob, again enthusiastic, mindless, came on behind the spearpoint of armed men, the hard core. The din was terrible and bloodthirsty, a manic giant screaming out his kill lust.

The thin line of police parted and the horsemen came out. Mounted police, at least two hundred of them, rode hard at the point of the mob. They were using sabers and they meant business. Police patience was at an end. Nick knew why—the Chinese flag had done it.

The horses smashed into the crowd. People reeled and went down. The screaming began. The sabers rose and fell, catching sparks from the spotlights and tossing them like bloody motes.

Nick was close enough to see it plainly. Tonaka turned and tried to run. to one side to elude the charge. She tripped over a man already down. The horse reared and plunged, as frightened as the humans, nearly unseating its rider. Tonaka was halfway up, fleeing again, when the steel-shod hoof came down and pulped her skull.

Nick ran for the Palace wall that stood beyond the lawn fringed by the hedge. No time for the postern now. He looked like a bum, like a rioter himself, and they would never let him in.

The wall was ancient and mossy, covered with lichen and with plenty of finger and footholds. Even with one arm he had no difficulty getting over it. He dropped inside the grounds and ran toward a blaze of lights near the moat. There was a blacktop drive leading to one of the permanent bridges and a barricade had been set up. There were cars behind the barricade, people milling around and a low-keyed shouting of military and police voices.

A Japanese soldier stuck a carbine in his face.

“Tomodachi” Nick husked. “Tomodachi—friend! Take me to Commander-san. Hubba! Hayai!”

The soldier pointed to a knot of men near one of the cars. He prodded Nick toward them with the carbine. Killmaster thought: This is going to be the toughest part—looking the way I do. He probably wasn’t speaking any too well, either. He was nervous, tense, beat up and damned near defeated. But he had to make them understand that the real trouble was only beginning. Somehow he had to do that—

The soldier said: “You put hands on head, please.” He spoke to one of the men in the group. A half dozen curious faces turned Nick’s way. He recognized one of them. Bill Talbot. Attache at the Embassy. Thank God!

Nick had not known, until then, how much his voice had suffered from the beatings he’d taken. He was croaking like a raven.

“Bill! Bill Talbot. Come here. It’s Carter. Nick Carter!”

The man came to him slowly. There was no recognition in his stare.

“Who? Who are you, fella? How do you know my name?”

Nick fought for control. No use blowing his top now. He took a deep breath. “Just listen to me, Bill. Who will buy my lavender?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. He came closer and peered at Nick. “Lavender is out this year,” he said. “I want cockles and mussels. Sweet Jesus, is it really you, Nick?”

“It is. Now listen and don’t interrupt. No time—”

He rattled out his story. The soldier had retired a few paces but he kept the carbine trained on Nick. The group of men by the car stared at them in silence.

Killmaster finished. “You take it now,” he said. “Quick does it. Philston must be somewhere in the grounds.”

Bill Talbot frowned at him. “You’ve been misinformed, Nick. The Emperor isn’t here. Hasn’t been for a week. He’s in retreat. Meditating. Satori. He’s at his private shrine near Fujiyoshida.”

Richard Philston had duped them all.

Nick Carter swayed, then caught himself. You did what you had to do.

“Okay,” he croaked. “Get me a fast car. Hubba! There might still be a chance. Fujiyoshida is only thirty miles and a plane is no good. I’d go ahead. You organize things here. They know you and they’ll listen. Call Fujiyoshida and—”

“Can’t. The lines are out. Damned near everything is out. Nick, you look like a corpse—don’t you think that I had better—”

“I think you had better get me that car,” Nick said grimly. “Right this goddamned minute.”

Chapter 14

The big Embassy Lincoln bored through the night, heading southwest over a road that was good for short stretches, bad in most. When it was finished it would be a super-highway—now it was a mass of detours. He hit three before he was ten miles out of Tokyo.

Still, it was likely to be the shortest way to the little shrine at Fujiyoshida, where the Emperor was at this moment in deep meditation, contemplating the cosmic mysteries and, no doubt, seeking to know the unknowable. The latter was a Japanese characteristic.

To Nick Carter, hunched over the wheel of the Lincoln and keeping the speedometer on the highest number without killing himself, it appeared very likely that the Emperor would succeed in penetrating the mysteries beyond the grave. Richard Philston had a head start, plenty of time and, until now, had succeeded in decoying Nick and the Chicoms beautifully.

That graveled the AXEman. How stupid of him not to check. Not to even think to check. Philston had let it drop casually that the Emperor was in residence at the Palace—ergo! He had accepted it without question. With Johnny Chow and Tonaka the question had not arisen, since they had known nothing of the plot to kill the Emperor. Killmaster, with no access to newspapers, radio or TV, had been an easy dupe. It had, he thought now as he came to another detour sign, been simply routine on Philston's part. It would make no difference in the job that Pete Fremont had undertaken to do—and Philston was hedging against any last minute change of heart, betrayal or upset in his plans. So beautifully simple—send your audience to one theater and stage your play in another. No applause, no interference, no witnesses.

He slowed the Lincoln to a crawl as he went through a village where candles made a thousand saffron polka dots in the gloom. They were on Tokyo power here and it was still out. Beyond the village the detour continued, muddy, saturated by recent rains, better suited for ox carts than for the low-slung job he was driving. He slammed the gas pedal down and spun her on through the clinging mud. If he got bogged down it was the end.

Nick's right hand was still tucked uselessly into his jacket pocket. The Browning and the hunting knife were beside him on the seat. His left arm and hand, numb to the bone from wrenching the big steering wheel, settled down to a steady relentless ache.

Bill Talbot had shouted something at Nick as he pulled away in the

Lincoln. Something about helicopters. That might work. Probably not. By the time they got matters organized, what with all the chaos in Tokyo and everything knocked out, and by the time they could get out to the airfields, it was going to be too late. And they didn't know what to look for. He knew Philston by sight. They didn't.

A helicopter, flapping into the tranquil shrine, would scare Philston away. Killmaster didn't want that. Not now. Not after he had come this far. Saving the Emperor was number one—but getting Richard Philston once and for all was a very close second. The man had done far too much damage in the world.

He came to a fork in the road. He missed a sign, rammed on the brakes and backed up to catch the sign in his lights. All he needed was to get lost. The sign said Fujiyoshida to the left and he had to trust it

The road was good now for a stretch and he let the Lincoln out until he was doing ninety. He rolled the window down and let the damp wind blast at him. He was feeling better now, beginning to come around and into his second store of reserve strength. He careered through another village before he knew it was there and thought he heard a frantic whistle behind him. He grinned. That would be one indignant cop.

A sharp left turn raced up at him. Beyond it was an arching, narrow, one-car bridge. Nick saw the ton just in time, clamped on his brakes, and the car went into a long, sliding, tire-screaming, right-hand skid. The wheel lashed at him, trying to tear away from his numbed fingers. He fought her out of the skid, cornered into the turn with a wrenching scream of springs and shocks and ruined the right rear fender as he just made it onto the bridge.

Beyond the bridge the road went to hell again. It made a sharp S turn and began to parallel the Fuji-sanroku electric railway. He passed a big red car standing dark and helpless on the tracks and caught a dim instant flash of people waving at him. A lot of people would be stranded tonight.

Less than ten miles now to the shrine. The road got worse and he had to slow. He forced himself to be calm, fighting back the frustration and impatience that gnawed at him. He was not an Oriental and every nerve cried for immediate and ultimate action, yet the bad road was a fact that must be faced. Patience. To ease his mind he allowed himself to think back along the tangled path he had been following. Or, rather, the path he had been pushed along.

It was like an enormous, intricate maze in which four dim figures stalked, each intent on his own plans. A black symphony of counterpoint and double-double-cross.

Tonaka—she had been ambivalent. She had loved her father. Yet she had been pure Communist and, in the end, had set Nick up to be

killed at the same time as her father. It must have been that way, only the assassin had botched it and killed Kunizo Matu first and so given Nick his chance. The cops could have been coincidental, but he still thought not. Probably Johnny Chow had set up the killing, against Tonaka's best judgment, and had phoned the cops as a secondary measure. When it hadn't worked Tonaka had asserted herself and decided to pull Nick back into the web. She could have been waiting for orders from Peking. And working with a maniac like Chow could never have been easy. Thus the fake kidnaping and the breast sent to him along with the note. That meant he had been followed all along and had never once spotted the tail. Nick grimaced and slowed nearly to a stop for a gigantic chuck hole. It happened. Not often, but it did happen. Sometimes you were lucky and the mistake didn't kill you.

Richard Philston was as good as Nick had always heard he was. It would have been his idea to use Pete Fremont to plant the Eta story in the world press. At the time they must have been planning on using the real Pete Fremont. Maybe he would have done it. Perhaps Nick, playing the role of Pete, had spoken truly when he said a lot of whisky had gone under the bridge. But if Pete had been ready to sell out, Kunizo Matu hadn't known it—and when he decided to use Pete as cover for Nick he had walked right into their hands.

Nick shook his head. It was as tangled a web as he had ever clawed his way out of. He was dying for a cigarette but no chance. He hit another detour and began to skirt a swamp that must have once been a paddy field. They had put down logs and covered them with gravel. From the paddies beyond the swamp the breeze brought an odor of rotting human feces.

Philston had been watching the Chicoms, probably a routine precaution, and his men had picked Nick up without any trouble. Philston thought he was Pete Fremont and Tonaka hadn't told him any differently. She and Johnny Chow must have gotten a real charge out of that—snatching Nick Carter right out from under Philston's nose. Killmaster! Who was as hated by the Russians, and as important to them as Philston himself was to the West.

Meantime Philston was getting his charge too. He was using the man he thought was Pete Fremont—with the Chicoms knowledge and permission—to set them up for the real payoff. To smear the Chinese with the onus of killing the Emperor of Japan.

Figures in the maze, each one intent on his own plan, each one trying to figure out how to double-cross the other. Using terror, using money, moving the little people around like pawns on the big board.

The road was blacktop now and he stepped on it. He had been to Fujiyoshida once before—a girl and saki pleasure jaunt—and for this he was now grateful. The shrine grounds had been closed that day, but

Nick recalled seeing a map in a guide book, and now he sought to recall it. When he concentrated he could remember nearly anything—and he concentrated now.

The shrine was just ahead. Maybe half a mile. Nick turned off his headlights and slowed. He might still have a chance; he couldn't know, but if he did he mustn't blow it now.

A lane led off to the left. They had come this way, that time before, and he recognized it. The lane skirted the grounds to the east. There was an ancient wall, low and crumbling, which would present no problems even to a one-armed man. Or to Richard Philston.

The lane was muddy, hardly more than two ruts. Nick ran the Lincoln in a few hundred feet and cut the engine. Painfully, stiffly, cursing a little under his breath, he got out without making any sound. He put the hunting knife in his left jacket pocket and, working awkwardly with his left hand, slipped a fresh clip into the Browning.

It had cleared off now and a crescent moon was trying to sad through the clouds. It gave just enough light for him to feel his way down off the lane, into a ditch and up the other side. He walked slowly through wet grass, already tall, to the old wall. There he stopped and listened.

He was in the umbrella gloom of a giant wisteria tree. A bird cheeped sleepily somewhere in the green cage. Nearby a few peepers were making their rhythmic castrati song. A strong scent of peonies tinged the faint breeze. Nick put his good hand on the low wad and vaulted over.

There would be security guards, of course. Maybe police, maybe the military, but they would be few and they would be less than alert. The average Japanese was incapable of thinking that the Emperor might be harmed. It simply would not occur to them. Not unless Talbot had worked a miracle in Tokyo and somehow gotten through.

The silence, the quiet darkness, belied that. Nick was still on his own.

He remained under the big wisteria for a minute, trying to visualize the map of the grounds as he had seen it that one time. He had come in from the east—that meant the little shrine, the chiisai, where only the Emperor was allowed to go, was somewhere off to his left. The larger shrine, with the arching torii over the main entrance, was straight ahead of him. Yes—that had to be right. The main gate was on the western side of the grounds and he was coming in from the east.

He began to follow the wall to his left, going cautiously and angling in a bit as he walked. The turf was springy and moist and he made no sound. Neither would Philston.

It struck Nick Carter then, really for the first time, that if he were

too late and he walked into the little shrine and found the Emperor with a knife in his back or a bullet through his head, AXE and Carter were going to be in one hed of a spot. It could be damned messy and it had better not happen. Hawk would have to be put in a strait jacket. Nick Shrugged and nearly smiled. He hadn't thought of the old man in hours.

The moon showed itself again and he saw the glitter of black water off to his right. Carp pool. The fish would live longer than he would. He went on, slower now, alert for sound and light.

He came to a graveled path leading in the right direction. It was too noisy and after a moment he left it and walked along the verge. He fished the hunting knife from his pocket and put it between his teeth. There was a cartridge in the chamber of the Browning and the safety was off. He was as ready as he was ever going to be.

The path coiled through a stand of giant maple and keaki trees, laced together by thick vines to form a natural arbor. Just beyond was a small pagoda, roof tiles reflecting the faint sheen of the moon. Nearby was a white-painted iron bench. Sprawled near the bench was, unmistakably, the body of a man. Brass buttons glinted. A small body in blue uniform.

The policeman's throat had been cut and the sword beneath him was stained black. The body was still warm. Not long ago. Killmaster ran now, on his toes, across an open stretch of lawn and around a copse of flowering trees until he saw faint light in the distance. The little shrine.

The light was very dim, as tenuous as a will-o'-the-wisp. It would be over the altar, he supposed, and it would be the only light. It was hardly a light at all. And somewhere in the gloom might be another body. Nick ran faster.

Two paved narrow paths converged on the entrance to the small shrine. Nick ran softly on the grass to the apex of the triangle formed by the paths. Here a thick growth of bushes separated him from the door of the shrine. The light, a streaky drugget of amber, oozed from the door onto the pavement. No sound. No movement. The AXEman felt a surge of belly sickness. He was too late. There was death in that little budding. He had the feeling and he knew it did not lie.

He pushed through the bushes, not worrying about noise now. Death had come and gone. The door of the shrine was half open. He went in. They lay halfway between the door and the altar. One of them moved and groaned as Nick entered.

They were the two Japanese who had gun-hustled him off the street. The short one was dead. The tall one still lived. He was bedy down and his glasses lay nearby, casting twin reflections of the tiny lamp glowing above the altar.

Trust Philston not to leave any witnesses. And yet something had gone wrong. Nick turned the tall Japanese over and knelt beside him. The man had been shot twice, gut and head, and he was just dying. That meant that Philston was using a silencer.

Nick put his face close to the dying man. "Where is Philston?"

The Japanese was a traitor, he had sold out to the Russians—or perhaps a lifelong Commie and faithful after all—but he was dying in terrible pain and had no idea who was questioning him. Or why. But his fading brain heard the question and gave the answer.

"Go to—to big shrine. Mistake—Emperor not here. Change—he—go big shrine. I—" He died.

Killmaster was out the door and running, taking the paved path off to the left. There might be time. Christ almighty—there might be time!

What vagary had prompted the Emperor to use the big shrine and not the little shrine on this particular night he did not know. Or care. It gave him one last chance. It would have upset Philston, too, who would be operating on a meticulously thought-out schedule.

It hadn't upset the cold-blooded bastard so much that he had overlooked the chance to get rid of his two confederates. Philston would be alone now. Alone with the Emperor and that was just as he had planned it.

Nick came to a broad tiled walk bordered by peony trees. Off a way was another pool and beyond that a long stretch of barren garden with black rocks arching into grotesques. The moon was brighter now, so bright that Nick saw the body of the priest in time to vault over it. He caught a glimpse of staring eyes, a bloodied brown robe. Philston had been this way.

Philston did not see him. He was intent on his business and he was loping along, light-footed as a cat, about fifty yards in front of Nick. He was wearing a robe, a brown priest's robe, and his shaven head caught the moonlight. The sonofabitch had thought of everything.

Killmaster moved closer to the wall, in under the arcade that skirted the shrine. There were benches here and he twined his way among them, keeping Philston in sight, keeping the same distance between them. And making a decision. To kill Philston or take him. It was no contest. Kill him. Now. Get in range and kill him here and now. One shot would do it. Then go back to the Lincoln and get the hell out of there.

Philston turned to his left and vanished.

Nick Carter turned on a burst of speed. He could still lose this battle. The thought was like cold steel in his guts. There wouldn't be much satisfaction in getting Philston after the man had murdered the Emperor.

He came to where Philston had turned off. The man was now only about thirty yards ahead of him, walking stealthily down a long corridor. He was moving slowly and on his toes. There was a single door at the end of the corridor. It would lead into one of the larger shrines and the Emperor would be there.

A faint light was coming from the door at the end of the corridor and Philston was silhouetted against it. A good shot. Nick raised the Browning and took careful aim at Philston's back. He did not want to risk a head shot in the uncertain light and he could always finish the man off afterward. He held the pistol at arm's length, sighted carefully and squeezed off the shot. The Browning clicked dully. Bad cartridge. A million to one chance and the old, lifeless ammo had come up with a big zero.

Philston was in the door now and there was no more time. He couldn't clear the gun in time with only one hand. Nick ran.

He was at the door. The room beyond was spacious. A single flame guttered over the altar. Before it a man sat cross-legged, his head down, deep in his own thoughts and unaware of Death stalking him.

Philston still had not seen or heard Nick Carter. He was tiptoeing across the room, the pistol in his hand made larger, snoutier, by the silencer screwed onto the muzzle. Nick put the Browning on the floor without sound and took the hunting knife from his pocket. He would have given anything for the little stiletto. All he had was the hunting knife. And about two seconds.

Philston was halfway across the room now. If the man before the altar heard anything, if he was aware of what was in the room with him, he made no sign. His head was sunk on his chest and he breathed deeply.

Philston raised the pistol.

Nick Carter called softly: "Philston!"

Philston whirled gracefully. Surprise, malice, rage flickered in amalgam on his too sensitive, too feminine face. For once there was no sneer. His shaven head sparked in the light from the torch. His cobra eyes widened.

"Fremont!" He fired.

Nick took one step to the side, turned to present a narrow target and hurled the knife. He did not, could not, wait. He went in to follow it up.

The pistol clattered on the stone floor. Philston stared down at the knife in his heart. He looked up at Nick, then back at the knife and then he fell. In dying reflex his hand reached for the pistol. Nick kicked it out of reach.

The little man before the altar had risen. He stood for a moment, quietly glancing from Nick Carter to the corpse on the floor. Philston

was not bleeding very much.

Nick bowed. He spoke briefly. The man listened without interruption. Admiration grew in the AXEmen. This was a cool hand.

The man was wearing only a light brown robe, loosely caught about his slender waist. His hair was thick, dark, cut *ebrosse* and streaked with gray at the temples. His feet were bare. He had a neatly trimmed moustache.

When Nick had finished speaking the little man took a pair of silver-rimmed glasses from the pocket of his robe and put them on. He peered at Nick for a moment, then down at the body of Richard Philston. Then, with a little indrawn hiss, he turned to Nick and bowed very low.

“Arigato.”

Nick bowed very low. It hurt his back but he did it

“Do itashimashite.”

The Emperor said: “You are free to go, as you suggest. You are right, of course. This must be kept secret. I can arrange that, I think. You will leave everything to me, please.”

Nick bowed again. “Then I will go. There is very little time.”

“One moment, please.” He took a jeweled and golden sunburst from around his neck and handed it to Nick by the golden chain.

“You will accept this, please. I wish it.”

Nick took the medal. The gold and jewels sparkled in the faint light. “Thank you.”

He saw the camera then and remembered that this man was a famous shutter bug. The camera was lying on a small table in a corner of the room and had, must have been, brought along absent-mindedly. Nick went to the table and picked up the camera. A flash cube was in the socket.

Nick bowed again. “May I use it. A record, you understand. It is important.”

The little man bowed deeply. “Of course. But I suggest haste. I think I hear a plane now.”

It was a helicopter but Nick did not say so. He straddled Philston and snapped a picture of the dead face. Another one for safety, then he bowed again.

“I will have to keep the camera.”

“Most certainly. Itashimashite. And now—*saijo-nara!*”

“Sayonara!”

They bowed to each other.

He had reached the Lincoln when the first helicopter blatted in and hovered over the grounds. The landing lights, bars of blue-white brilliance, smoked in the damp night air.

Killmaster put the Lincoln in gear and started backing out of the

lane.

Chapter 15

Hawk had said nine sharp, Friday morning.

Nick Carter was two minutes late. He did not feel badly about it. Considering everything, he thought himself entitled to a couple of minutes leeway. He was there. Thanks to the International Dateline.

He was wearing one of his newer suits, a light spring flannel, and his right hand was in a cast nearly to the elbow. Strips, of adhesive made a tic-tac-toe pattern on his lean face. He was still limping badly as he walked into the outer office. Delia Stokes was at her typewriter.

She gave him a head to toe glance and an effulgent smile. "I'm so glad, Nick. We were a little worried for a time."

"I was a little worried myself, for a time. Are they in there?"

"Yes. Since half past—waiting for you."

"Hmmm—do you know if Hawk has told them anything yet?"

"He hasn't. Waiting for you. As of now just the three of us know."

Nick straightened his tie. "Thanks, sweetheart. Remind me to buy you a drink after. A little celebration is in order."

Delia smiled. "Do you think you should be seen out with an older woman. After all, I'm not a Girl Scout any more."

"Cut it out, Delia. One more crack like that and you blow the drink."

An impatient rasp came over the intercom. "Della! Send Nick in, please."

Delia shook her head. "He's got ears like a cat."

"Built-in sonar." He went into the inner office.

Hawk had a cigar in his mouth. The cellophane was still on it. That meant he was excited and trying not to show it. He had talked with Hawk on the phone at length, and the old man had insisted on rigging this little scene. Nick didn't understand it, except that Hawk was trying for some kind of a dramatic effect. But to what purpose?

Hawk introduced him to Cecil Aubrey and a man named Terence, a dour lanky Scot who merely nodded and puffed on an obscene pipe.

Extra chairs had been brought in. When they were all seated Hawk said, "All right, Cecil. Tell him what you want."

Nick listened in growing amazement and puzzlement. Hawk avoided his eye. What was the old devil up to?

Cecil Aubrey went through it fast. What he wanted, it appeared, was that Nick go to Japan and do what Nick had just been to Japan and done.

At the end Aubrey said: "Richard Philston is extremely dangerous. I suggest that you kill him on sight rather than try to take him."

Nick glanced at Hawk. The old man was staring innocently at the ceding.

Nick took the glossy photo from his inner pocket and handed it to the big Englishman. "This your man Philston?"

Cecil Aubrey stared down at the dead face, at the shaven head. His mouth opened as his jaw dropped.

"I'll be damned! It looks like—but without the hair it's a little hard to—I can't be sure."

The Scot came over to look. One quick glance. He tapped his superior on the shoulder, then nodded to Hawk.

"It's Philston. Na doubt about it. I dinna ken how you did it, mon, but congratulations."

To Aubrey he added quietly, "It's Richard Philston, Cecil, and ye know it."

Cecil Aubrey put the photo on Hawk's desk. "Yes. It's Dick Philston. I've waited a long time for this."

Hawk gave Nick a hard stare. "That will be all for right now, Nick. I'll see you after lunch."

Aubrey raised a hand. "But wait—I mean I'd like to hear some of the details. This is amazing and—"

"Later," said Hawk. "Later, Cecil, after we've discussed our own very private business."

Aubrey frowned. Coughed. Then, "Oh, yes. Of course, David. You needn't worry. I keep my bargains."

At the door Nick looked back. He had never seen Hawk in exactly this light before. Of a sudden his boss looked like a wily old cat—a cat with cream smeared all over his whiskers.